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# Making Student Engagement Visible: Using Self-Determination Theory to Examine How Two Social Studies Teachers Support Students' Needs for Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness

Audrey Schewe

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This dissertation, MAKING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT VISIBLE: USING SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY TO EXAMINE HOW SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHERS SUPPORT STUDENTS' NEEDS FOR AUTONOMY, COMPETENCE, AND RELATEDNESS, by AUDREY H. SCHEWE, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Philosophy, in the College of Education, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

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MAKING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT VISIBLE: USING SELF-DETERMINATION  
THEORY TO EXAMINE HOW TWO SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHERS SUPPORT  
STUDENTS' NEEDS FOR AUTONOMY, COMPETENCE,  
AND RELATEDNESS

by

AUDREY H. SCHEWE

Under the Direction of Dr. Chara Haeussler Bohan

ABSTRACT

Student engagement in academic work is critical for learning and scholastic achievement. Fortunately, an abundance of empirical evidence and engagement theories recommend what educational contexts are most likely to engage students in learning. Yet the epidemic of adolescent disengagement in schools suggests there is a gap, even a chasm, between student engagement research and practice. This study addresses this critical void in the literature; to understand how education theory can inform practice to improve the quality of student engagement in learning.

I approached my research question, “How do secondary social studies teachers promote and sustain student engagement in academic work?” through the lens of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Self-determination theory suggests that teachers’ support of students’ psychological needs for autonomy (e.g. by minimizing coercion, maximizing student voices and choices, providing meaningful rationales for learning), competence (e.g. by providing

challenging work along with structures and feedback to promote self-efficacy), and relatedness (e.g. by developing warm and caring relationships in the classroom) facilitates and promotes student engagement. Using a multiple case study design, rich and varied data collection processes, and directed qualitative content analysis, I explored how social studies teachers may support (or thwart) their students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness.

The students in this study confirmed their needs for autonomy, to engage in “real discussions” with their peers and make decisions about important problems. They shared that they engage in learning when activities are meaningful, real world and worth their effort. I found that social studies teachers support autonomy by developing students' emotional, personal, social, conceptual and authentic connections to the content. In addition, I confirmed that warm and trusting classroom relationships, coupled with challenging, organized and structured learning experiences that promote student efficacy, support students' needs for relatedness and competency in the classroom. Accordingly, engaging students in academic work necessitates that teachers meet all three of these basic needs. By exploring engagement through the experiences of teachers and students in real classroom settings, I provide social studies educators with a rich and user-friendly understanding of how student engagement can be developed and sustained.

**INDEX WORDS:** Student engagement, Social studies, Education, Motivation, Autonomy, Competency, Relatedness, Discussion, Self-determination theory



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A Dissertation

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Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Teaching and Learning Social Studies

in

the Department of Middle and Secondary Education

in

the College of Education

Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA  
2016

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to young people everywhere, including my own children, who wonder, “Why do I need to learn social studies?” and to their teachers who are wondering, “What can I do to help my students think social studies is awesome?”

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The most immediate and persisting issue for students and teachers is not low achievement, but student engagement.

~ Fred Newmann, *Student Engagement and Achievement in American Secondary Schools*, 1992,  
p. 2

You can lead a child to school, but you cannot make him learn.

~Anonymous

### Background

Student engagement in academic work is critical for learning and scholastic achievement. Students who believe that they are not capable of doing the work, who do not find the curriculum content interesting and meaningful, and who do not feel supported by their teachers and their peers, are unlikely to invest the time and energy necessary to learn and succeed in school. Teachers cannot manufacture student motivation; however, they can create classroom contexts that support the motivation that already exists within the students themselves (Reeve, 2012). Engagement contributes to academic achievement because it “drives learning” and activates the students’ *will* and *skill* needed for school success (Lawson & Lawson, 2013).

School achievement, however, is not necessarily synonymous with student engagement. Many school practices may actually diminish students’ interest and long-term investment in learning. Some students are motivated to learn by the promise of good grades or test scores, the competition among classmates or the possibility of attending a top-notch university upon graduation. However, if a student *achieves* (e.g. receives all As) without *engaging* (e.g. developing an interest in and value for the subject, applying learning to unfamiliar scenarios, persisting in the face of adversity), can educators and parents conclude that the student has learned? (Dweck, 2006).

Academic engagement, thus, is not only a means to achievement, but it is also a highly desired outcome of education. Engaged students do more than perform academically; they also exert effort, demonstrate persistence, use self-regulation strategies to achieve their goals, push themselves to exceed teachers' expectations, and enjoy challenges and learning (Klem & Connell, 2004; National Research Council, 2004). Teaching for engagement as an outcome of education means helping students find value in learning, seek mastery and understanding of tasks, persevere when confronted by new challenges, use cognitive strategies to solve unfamiliar problems, and develop a long-term commitment to learning (Ames, 1990). Student engagement, conceptualized as both a means and ends of learning, underscores the potential and the relevancy of the construct, not just for students who struggle with achievement or who appear disinterested in school, but for all students (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012a; Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

Student engagement in social studies learning illustrates this dual notion of engagement as a means to academic success and as an end in itself. When social studies teachers help their students develop an interest in and value for content, a desire to participate in classroom discussions, and an ability to critically examine multiple perspectives on controversial topics, student achievement (i.e. grades) is more likely to increase (Levstik, 2002; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992). In this sense, engagement is the process or the means by which “authentic” social studies learning can occur (Dewey, 1938; Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1996).

Engagement is also an important outcome of social studies education. The National Council for the Social Studies (2010) describes the goal of social studies as “the promotion of civic competence – the knowledge, intellectual processes, and democratic dispositions required of students to be active and engaged participants in public life” (p. 210). Parker (2008) contends

that this underlying civic purpose of social studies demands that students become both *democratically enlightened* (knowledgeable about civic life) and *politically engaged* (able to use that knowledge to participate responsibly and intelligently in civic life). Parker (2008) argues that both “knowing democracy” and “doing democracy” are critical for achieving the goal of social studies education: *enlightened political engagement* (p. 76).

The goal of enlightened political engagement calls on students to participate in classroom deliberations, seek out and master social studies knowledge and learn to appreciate the value of social studies concepts and content for their own lives and for life beyond the classroom. Thus, social studies education, guided by the purpose of enlightened political engagement, demands student engagement. This “energy in action” compels students to participate in classroom activities and find social studies concepts and skills meaningful. The civic purpose for social studies calls on students to commit to *knowing* and *doing* democracy long after they have graduated from high school. Engaged citizens do far more than vote and pay taxes; they educate themselves about important issues, speak out against injustices, question their leaders, volunteer, deliberate controversial topics, support or protest public policies, and practice tolerance (Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2003). In this sense, engaging students in social studies learning is essential, not only for school learning and achievement, but also for instilling in students a life-long desire to engage in public life.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the importance of student engagement, both for academic achievement and as a desired outcome of schooling, several research studies reveal that adolescent disengagement in

schools is pervasive (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Some studies suggest that 40 – 60% of adolescents are “chronically disengaged,” inattentive, show little effort, do not complete tasks and claim to be bored (Finn, 1989). In the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), researchers surveyed more than 350,000 students in over 40 states from 2006 to 2010. They found that almost 50% of high school students reported being bored in class every day (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). Students stated that the “material wasn’t interesting” (81.3%), “material wasn’t relevant to me” (41.6%), there was “no interaction with the teacher” (34.5%), and the “work wasn’t challenging enough” (32.8%) (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012, p. 752).

Whether they are dropping out of school physically or mentally, adolescents describe school as boring, meaningless and disconnected from their lives (Marks, 2000; National Research Council, 2004; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). Engaging adolescents in academic work presents unique challenges. Biological changes associated with puberty, changes in relationships with family and peers, increasing concerns about identities and roles, and the social and institutional changes that come with middle and high school environments result in steady decreases in student engagement from the late elementary years through high school (National Research Council, 2004; Wigfield & Wagner, 2005). “Adolescents are too old and too independent to follow teachers’ demands out of obedience, and many are too young, inexperienced, or uninformed to fully appreciate the value of succeeding in school” (National Research Council, 2004, p. 2). The insidious nature of disengagement among young people underscores the pressing need for a greater understanding of the engagement construct and how it can guide interventions and reform efforts in middle and high school classrooms.

Research on student engagement in social studies echoes the broader findings from

studies of disengagement in school learning. Focus groups and student self-report surveys suggest that, of all of the subjects taught in middle and high schools, the discipline of social studies consistently ranks low in terms of student engagement. In focus groups conducted by Public Agenda (1997), students argued that studying history had little utility value. “The worst part of the day is going to social studies. It’s not that it’s hard. It’s just real boring. American History...I’ve been hearing it forever, and I don’t really care about what happened in the past” (p. 18). Additional research studies reveal that a majority of students in the United States, at all grade levels, find social studies to be one of the least interesting, most irrelevant subjects in the school curriculum (Schug, Todd, & Beery, 1984; Shaughnessy & Haladyna, 1985; VanSickle, 1990; Zhao & Hoge, 2005).

Potential reasons for this negative attitude toward social studies include both instructional and engagement factors. Social studies tasks tend to call for memorizing and reporting on specific information and content, “rather than asking students for higher-level thinking, interpretation, or problem solving” (King, Newmann, & Carmichael, 2010, p. 53). Negative perceptions result from teachers speeding through a laundry list of content standards at a superficial level (VanSledright & Limon, 2006). In addition, students tend to equate uninteresting with unimportant; thus, students are not engaged in learning social studies because they do not value the content. The lack of interest in and value for social studies may also be the result of the perceived disconnect between students’ lives and aspirations and contemporary and historical social conditions. “Without perceived linkages and a sense of potential utility, they have little motivation to invest the time and effort required to learn the knowledge and skills social studies teachers can teach them” (VanSickle, 1990, p. 23).

It is fair to assume that most social studies educators enter the teaching profession eager to engage young people and armed with ideas of how to bring content to life to help create effective citizens. They may envision students deliberating important persistent issues, analyzing primary source documents from multiple perspectives, simulating key historical turning points, asking poignant and thought-provoking questions, and finding their own voices in the narratives of history. However, when visions of engaging students turn into blank faces and empty stares, when assessments suggest minimal learning gains, and when the main question students are asking is “Is this going to be on the test?” it may be tempting for teachers to cry out in frustration, “These students just aren’t motivated!”

However, more than three decades of research on student motivation and engagement indicates that motivation and engagement are not student attributes or fixed *traits*. In other words, the claim, “These students just aren’t motivated!” finds little support in the literature on motivation and engagement. Rather, researchers argue that student motivation and engagement are malleable *states* that can be shaped by schools through the learning contexts teachers provide to their students (Fredericks, et al., 2004). Thus, the claim, “These students just aren’t motivated at this moment in this particular context!” might be more accurate. The conceptualization of student engagement as a *state* rather than a *trait* is significant because it makes intervention possible and legitimate (Lam, Wong, Yang, & Liu, 2012). After all, if students’ motivation were fixed, there would be no point in trying to change it.

Although schools cannot control all of the factors that influence students’ academic engagement, considerable evidence within the engagement literature suggests that the instructional decisions teachers make have powerful consequences for student engagement, whether the students are rich or poor, or attend schools in urban, suburban or rural communities



(L. H. Anderman, Andrzejewski, & Allen, 2011; Newmann, et al., 1992). Engaging teachers promote students' confidence in their abilities to learn and succeed by providing challenging instruction and support for meeting those challenges. They provide choices for students and they make the curriculum and instruction relevant to adolescents' experiences so that students find value in learning (Ainley, 2012; Brophy, 2010; Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012b; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

Studies of student engagement often include recommendations for how teachers can meet students' motivational and engagement needs. In addition, educational catalogues are replete with promises of research-based products that are sure to engage students in learning. Surprisingly, however, few studies examine how adolescents perceive their own engagement in learning in the various disciplines, or how teachers actually create engaging classroom cultures that support students' positive motivational and learning-related beliefs and behaviors (L. H. Anderman, et al., 2011; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Editors of the most recent *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* (Christenson, et al., 2012b) highlight the need for understanding "how engagement works when it works" (p. 814-815). They suggest that there is a strong demand for "having the results of current research on student engagement put to practical use" (p. 815).

Additionally, some researchers argue for a shift in methodologies used to understand student engagement – from quantitative studies, that give "primacy to countable measures" to more qualitative studies, through which the student experience can be better understood (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). Much of the research conducted on student engagement comes from the field of educational psychology, which tends to value experimental methodologies that look for quantifiable cause and effect relationships between learning contexts and standardized

achievements. These studies emphasize statistical significance, reliability and generalizability over narratives and descriptions of experiences of student engagement. Quantitative data also do not reveal how students perceive their experiences of learning. The voices of teachers and students in classrooms, those for whom the research is intended to help, are too often left out of the research on academic engagement. Qualitative descriptions of classroom engagement from the perspectives of students and teachers might strengthen and humanize quantitative surveys and experiments (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). By exploring engagement experiences, researchers can provide a richer understanding of how academic engagement is developed and sustained. A qualitative case study approach to the study of engagement seeks to “gain an understanding of the relationships, connections, and multiple pathways that lead to student engagement with work and learning” (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012, p. 749).

In addition to methodological challenges to studying engagement, research studies on students’ emotional, cognitive and behavioral engagement, specifically in the domain of social studies, are hard to find. Much of the research on student engagement has focused on math, science and literacy/reading (L. H. Anderman, et al., 2011; Christenson, et al., 2012b; Guthrie, Wigfield, & You, 2012). There are few studies of student engagement in social studies (L.H. Anderman et al., 2011). In fact, Levstik (2002) suggests that the field of social studies is “remarkably under researched” (p. 96). Instructional practices that support motivation and engagement in one domain may not transfer to another subject area (Eccles, 2005; Guthrie, et al., 2012). Some studies of engagement in social studies have examined how instructional strategies, such as those that provide optimal challenge, curiosity, suspense, fantasy, cognitive dissonance, novelty, and simulations, can induce student interest in social studies (Bergin, 1999; Gehlbach et al., 2008; Hootstein, 1995; Savich, 2009). However, as John Dewey (1913) argued more than a

century ago, teachers must *catch* and *hold* student attention to bring about long-term effort, persistence and commitment to social studies learning. While educational psychologists have examined how classroom contexts support or hinder student engagement, few studies examine what it means to be engaged in learning social studies or how social studies teachers successfully promote and sustain student engagement in their classrooms.

### **Purpose of the Study**

To that end, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate how teachers promote and sustain their students' engagement in social studies learning. Rather than examine individual factors and variables and their impacts on achievement, in this study, I conceptualized student engagement as “a series of relationships,” between students and their teachers, peers, classroom contexts, and academic work. By describing these relationships, I wanted to help educators understand engagement from the perspectives of teachers and students in secondary social studies classrooms. The purpose of this study was not to generalize findings, or to suggest that all secondary social studies classrooms can or should reproduce the teaching and learning experiences described at this research site. Rather, the purpose of this study was to depict, from the perspectives of teachers and their students, “what works when it works” to engage students – emotionally, cognitively and behaviorally – in social studies learning in these two classrooms at this particular school. Portrayals of what engaging social studies classroom contexts look and sound like at this research site can provide social studies teachers in other settings with practical considerations for translating their visions of engaging students in social studies into realities.

## **Research Questions**

The central question guiding this study of student engagement with academic work in the discipline of social studies was: How do secondary social studies teachers promote and sustain their students' emotional, cognitive and behavioral engagement in learning activities? According to Skinner and Pitzer's (2012) dynamic model of motivational development organized around student engagement with academic work (see the discussion of the conceptual framework later in this chapter), classroom contexts, characterized by warmth (vs. rejection), structure (vs. chaos) and self-determined learning experiences (vs. coercion), are more likely to support students' psychological needs for autonomy, competency and relatedness. When teachers fulfill these psychological needs, their students are more likely to have the motivational basis to engage emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally with learning activities. Through this model, Skinner and Pitzer (2012) explain how classroom contexts influence student motivation, which, in turn, fuels engagement (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

Thus, to support this inquiry into student engagement in social studies learning activities, I investigated a secondary, but closely related, research question that addresses the dynamic processes of engagement as conceptualized by Skinner and Pitzer (2012). This secondary question was: How do social studies teachers support their students' needs for autonomy, competency, and relatedness? By examining this related research question, I sought to gain a more in-depth understanding of how student engagement functions in secondary social studies classrooms, and how social studies teachers might promote and sustain student engagement in learning.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Several theories of motivation and engagement facilitated and supported this inquiry into student engagement. Research and theory on student engagement is inextricably linked to research and theory on motivation. In fact, motivation theories inform much of the literature on student engagement. Yet, confusion and debate over the definitions of and relationships between motivation and engagement continue to thwart efforts to develop a common language in student engagement research (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Some of the literature on student engagement treats engagement and motivation as synonymous (National Research Council, 2004), while other researchers view them as different constructs. In this study, I drew on Newmann's (1989) characterization of motivation as the drive, the beliefs and the reasons why students seek (or do not seek) achievement-related outcomes, and engagement as involving participation, connection, attachment and integration in certain tasks or settings. In this sense, engagement is the behavioral manifestation of motivation (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Motivation is thus necessary but not sufficient for engagement (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008).

This study of student engagement in social studies learning was organized around self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002), a macro theory of motivation, which emphasizes the role of "vitalizing" students' inner motivational tendencies as integral for facilitating high-quality engagement (Reeve, 2012). Self-determination theory, its micro theories of basic needs theory and organismic integration theory, and interest theory (Hidi & Renninger, 2006), framed this study on engagement. Collectively, these theories provided the lenses to examine the students' beliefs, values, goals, interests, perceptions of control, and sense of belongingness, and their influences on achievement-related behaviors such as persistence, quality and quantity of effort, cognitive engagement and actual performance (Gredler, 2009). Essentially, these theories

address the student's need to know: "Can I do this?" "Do I want to do this, and why?" and "Do I belong?" How students answer these questions has important implications for their motivation and ultimately their engagement in academic learning (National Research Council, 2004).

### **Self-determination Theory**

Self-determination theory postulates that all humans have a need to be autonomous, to be curious and seek out knowledge; essentially people engage in activities because they want to (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). In *basic needs theory*, Deci and Ryan (2002) propose that there are basic, innate psychological needs that underlie all behavior. These needs include *competence* (the desire for understanding and mastery), *autonomy* (the need for purpose, self-directed behavior and agency) and *relatedness* (the need to belong or connect with others). Self-determination theory holds that when classroom or cultural contexts support these needs, individuals will engage constructively with learning; however, when contexts thwart these needs, individuals become disaffected. Researchers refer to the beliefs about one's competency, autonomy and relatedness as the individual's *self-system processes* (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). Self-determination theorists suggest that school and classroom contexts, such as teacher-student relationships, classroom structures, curriculum content and instructional strategies can influence student engagement by supporting (or undermining) students' self-support systems. Assuming these beliefs are durable, classroom contexts can shape students' reality and thus guide their engagement in academic work (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

When students believe that they are competent, autonomous, and connected in the classroom, the decisions and choices they make are *self-determined* and *intrinsic motivation* takes over (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Intrinsic motivation is "the human need to be competent and

self-determining in relation to the environment” (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2010). In other words, when intrinsically motivated, students participate in academic work without regard to any external reward, (e.g. listening to music, playing with friends); they engage in an activity for the sake of the activity itself because they choose to engage. It is the process of becoming self-determined in one’s affairs that is intrinsically motivating for the students rather than an existing interest in the content or activity (Schunk, et al., 2010). In contrast, when extrinsically motivated, students participate in activities because they want to gain a separate consequence (e.g. good grades, stickers, awards) that is dependent on the behavior; thus the reward fully controls the behavior. Self-determination theory suggests that when students feel a sense of control and agency about their learning (autonomy), they believe they can be successful (competence), and they feel connected to their teachers and peers (relatedness), they are likely to engage in learning, even if they do not have an intrinsic interest in the subject matter (Brophy, 1999; Ryan, Deci, & Grolnick, 1995; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

## **Interest Theory**

Discussions of academic motivation and engagement inevitably lead to questions about students’ interests. Interest theorists seek to explain how students develop their perceptions of autonomy, or how they come to answer the question, “Do I want to do this, and why?” Hidi and Renninger (2006) distinguish between *individual interest* and *situational interest*. Individual interest refers to a student’s consistent or innate disposition to re-engage in an activity or with content. This type of interest demonstrates a fairly stable relationship between the individual and the content, and it is clearly an important factor in academic motivation and learning (Schiefele, Krapp, & Winteler, 1992). For example, someone who has individual interest for social studies

has “stored knowledge” about and “positive value” for social studies content and is eager to re-engage in the content even when faced with challenges (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000).

Situational interest, in contrast, is an emotional state triggered by specific features of a task or activity (e.g. a court drama simulation, a controversial discussion, a movie, etc.). However, unlike individual interest, situational interest can disappear quickly, and it is not necessarily characterized by deep knowledge or value for the content (Renninger & Hidi, 2002). Situational interest can play a key role in learning; especially when students do not have pre-existing individual interests in academic activities, content areas or topics.

However, Hidi and Baird (1986) draw an important distinction between factors that trigger situational interest and those that influence interest over time. While games, simulations, role-plays, or puzzles may spark an interest in a social studies topic, the key to maintaining interest “lies in finding ways to empower students by helping them find meaning or personal relevance” (Hidi and Harackiewicz, 2000). Thus, the challenge for teachers is to maintain students’ situational interest throughout the learning. Rather than focus on how to make lessons interesting for students, Willingham (2009) suggests that teachers focus on why the lesson is meaningful. If students focus on the “fun” rather than on the meaning or significance of the lesson, engagement will soon dissipate and learning gains will be lost (Willingham, 2009).

It is important that teachers understand motivation theories such as self-determination theory and interest theory. Students who believe they do not have the ability to be successful, who do not feel connected to peers or the teacher, or who are not interested or do not see value in classroom learning, will not engage in classroom activities, regardless of how engaging or interesting the lesson might appear to the teacher.



## **Authentic Intellectual Work**

As students develop beliefs about their competence, autonomy and sense of belonging, their primary “interaction partners” are the academic tasks that they undertake in the classroom (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). The qualities of the academic work that students encounter have clear implications for student engagement. For nearly a century, education reformers have argued that student engagement in academic work requires the immersion of students in *authentic* learning experiences, where content and skills are embedded in real-world contexts (Dewey, 1938).

Learning activities promote active participation, engagement and effort when they are “hands-on, heads-on, project-based, relevant, progressive, and integrated across subject matter, or in other words, intrinsically motivating, inherently interesting and fun” (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012, p. 29).

However, while constructivist teaching and learning strategists seek to shift the role of the student from passive recipient of content to active participant in constructing knowledge, Newmann (1996) cautions that “Even highly active students can produce work that is intellectually shallow and weak” (p. 281).

Newmann and his associates (King, et al., 2010; Newmann, et al., 1996; Newmann, et al., 1992) turned to the complex intellectual challenges adults face in their public and personal lives to develop a set of research-based standards for high quality authentic student learning. They used these standards to develop a model of student engagement in academic work based on the concept of authentic intellectual work (AIW). AIW is defined as the *construction of knowledge*, through the use of *disciplined inquiry*, to produce discourse, products, or performances that have *value beyond school* (Figure 1) (Bohan & Feinberg, 2008 ; Scheurman & Newmann, 1998). The AIW model for intellectual achievement consists of more than just the ability to do well on an academic test. It involves the application of knowledge (facts, concepts, theories, and insights) to

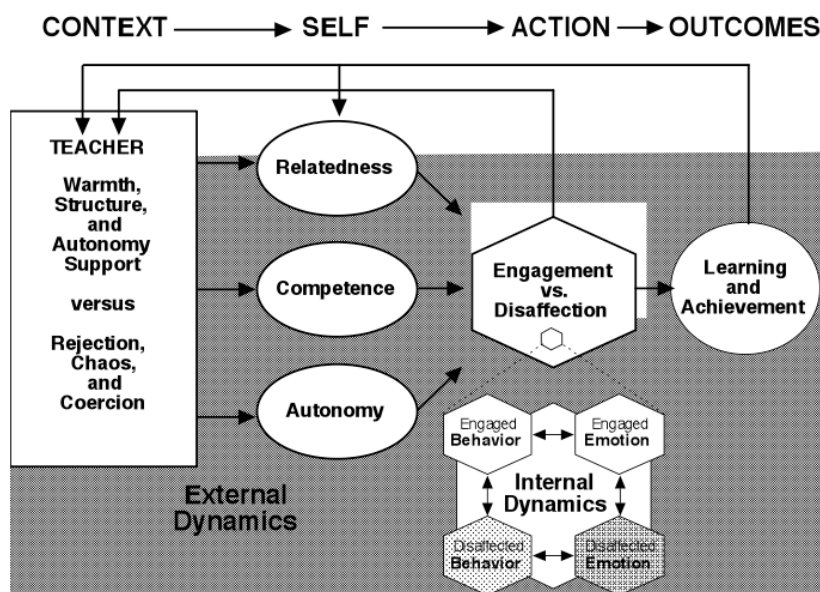
questions and issues within a particular domain. In this study, I will draw on AIW to examine the types of work teachers ask their students to do, explore how teachers and students perceive the authenticity of tasks and instruction in the classroom, and interrogate the authenticity of the assignments as they support or hinder student engagement in academic work.

<b>Authentic Intellectual Achievement</b>	<b>Authentic Assessment Tasks</b>	<b>Authentic Instruction</b>
<b>Construction of Knowledge</b>	<u>Organization and Analysis:</u> Require students to interpret, synthesize, and evaluate complex information <u>Consideration of Alternatives:</u> Provide opportunities for students to consider divergent perspectives	<u>Higher Order Thinking:</u> Lead students to manipulate information by synthesizing, generalizing, hypothesizing, and arriving at conclusions that produce new understandings for them
<b>Disciplined Inquiry</b>	<u>Content and Concepts:</u> Ask students to show understanding, rather than mere awareness of core ideas in the subject <u>Process:</u> Expect students to demonstrate methods and procedures used by experts in the field <u>Elaborated Communication:</u> Require students to present explanations and conclusions through extended forms of oral, written, and symbolic language	<u>Deep Knowledge:</u> Address ideas central to the discipline with enough thoroughness so that conceptual relationships can be explored and complex understandings produced <u>Substantive Conversation:</u> Engage students in extended conversational exchanges with teacher and peers in a way that builds shared understanding
<b>Value Beyond School</b>	<u>Problem:</u> Ask students to address problems and issues similar to ones they are likely to encounter outside school <u>Audience:</u> Ask students to direct performances to someone other than the teacher	<u>Connections to the World beyond the Classroom:</u> Help students make connections between disciplinary content and public problems or personal experiences

*Figure 1.* Criteria for Authentic Intellectual Achievement linked to standards for classroom instruction and assessment tasks. Adapted from “Authentic intellectual work in social studies: Putting performance before pedagogy” by G. Scheurman, & F.M. Newmann, 1998, *Social Education*, 62(1).

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study of student engagement in social studies learning draws on self-determination theory, its micro theories, and interest theory, and it integrates AIW notions about the authentic nature of academic work. Skinner and Pitzer's (2012) motivational model of classroom-level engagement in learning activities is grounded in self-determination theory and organized around student engagement (and disaffection) with learning activities. While many engagement theories focus on dropout prevention and at-risk populations, Skinner and Pitzer's (2012) model (*Figure 2*) examines motivation and engagement with academic work within the classroom-learning context "because it is the only gateway to learning and scholastic development" (p. 37).



*Figure 2.* A dynamic model of motivational development organized around student engagement and disaffection. Adapted from Developmental dynamics of student engagement, coping, and everyday resilience by E.A. Skinner & J.R. Pitzer, 2012 *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* (pp.21-44).

The Skinner-Pitzer (2012) model provides a structure for examining the relationships among educational contexts, student motivation, and academic engagement for all learners.

Importantly, this motivational model focuses on both achievement and engagement as desired outcomes. “High grades or high achievement test scores cannot be considered a success if they come at the cost of undermining engagement and increasing student disaffection” (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012, p. 33). According to this model, engagement (as opposed to disaffection) in a learning activity is more likely to happen when the immediate learning contexts provide students with opportunities to fulfill their self-system needs for competence, autonomy and belonging. Furthermore, Skinner and Pitzer (2012) characterize learning contexts that provide teacher warmth, classroom structure, and support for student autonomy as the three contextual features that are most likely to meet these needs, and thus, facilitate engagement.

Skinner and Pitzer (2012) conceptualize engagement around those factors that *facilitate* (or influence) engagement, and those factors that *indicate* (or describe) engagement. The various classroom contexts and self-system processes discussed earlier are facilitators of student engagement. Indicators of engagement (and its counterpart disaffection) are organized into three dimensions: emotional, cognitive and behavioral (see *Figure 3*). These indicators of engagement and disaffection are the *action* component of a student’s motivational development (see *Figure 2*). Thus, this model conceptualizes engagement as the “outward manifestation of motivation” (Skinner, 2012, p. 22). The Skinner-Pitzer (2012) motivational model of engagement and the theoretical perspectives around which it was developed provide this study with the conceptual lens to explore adolescent engagement in social studies learning.

### **Research Design**

A pedagogically oriented qualitative case study emerged as the research design best suited for this study of student engagement. Qualitative case study design enables researchers to

	<b>Indicators of Engagement</b>	<b>Indicators of Disaffection</b>
<b>Behavioral</b>	Action, initiation Effort, exertion Working hard Attempts Persistence Intensity Focus, attention Concentration Absorption Involvement	Passivity, procrastination Giving up Restlessness Half-hearted Unfocused, inattentive Distracted Mentally withdrawn Burned out, exhausted Unprepared Absent
<b>Emotional</b>	Enthusiasm Interest Enjoyment Satisfaction Pride Vitality Zest	Boredom Disinterest Frustration/anger Sadness Worry/anxiety Shame Self-blame
<b>Cognitive</b>	Purposeful Approach Goal strivings Strategy search Willing participation Preference for challenge Mastery Follow-through, care Thoroughness	Aimless Helpless Resigned Unwilling Opposition Avoidance Apathy Hopeless Pressured

*Figure 3.* Indicators of behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement and disaffection in the classroom. Adapted from Developmental dynamics of student engagement, coping, and everyday resilience by E.A. Skinner & J.R. Pitzer (2012) *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* (pp.21-44).

explore a complex contemporary phenomenon within its natural context using a variety of data sources (Yin, 2009). The aim of this case study was to explore how social studies teachers engage (or disengage) their students in learning social studies. As such, in this case study, I examined the perspectives and practices of teachers and students in two social studies

classrooms, the interactions between students and the educational contexts provided by their teachers, and the intended or unintended consequences of those classroom interactions on learning and engagement (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Stake (2005) argues that, “Case study is not a methodological choice, but a choice of what is to be studied...by whatever methods we choose to study *the case*” (p. 443). In this study, the case (or the unit of analysis) is student engagement in secondary social studies classrooms. I chose to conduct the research study at The Gateway School (pseudonym), a small, preK – 12, private school in the southeastern United States. Participants included two secondary social studies teachers and their students in grades eight and eleven. Classroom contexts examined included tasks, learning activities and academic work, authority structures, types of recognition, types and uses of cooperative groups, types and purposes of evaluations or assessments, the use of and perspectives on time as related to learning, and how social relationships are encouraged (or discouraged) in the classroom (Ames, 1990).

Case study research design promotes the deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of the phenomena or the case under study (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In the current study, I deconstructed the phenomena of student engagement in social studies by using a variety of ethnographic data collection methods. These methods provided me with multiple emic (insider) perspectives on student engagement with learning activities. In-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers, weekly classroom observations, student and teacher reflections on engagement in learning activities via online journals, and document analysis of curriculum and instructional materials such as lesson plans, assessments and student work samples provided a variety of perspectives on the many dimensions of the student engagement phenomena. The qualitative methods selected to investigate *the case* allowed me to deconstruct and interpret student

engagement in social studies by “stepping in the shoes” of the teachers and students in the classrooms.

I reconstructed the phenomena of student engagement through qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis (QCA) is a research method for describing the meaning of qualitative material through a systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Schreier, 2012). The goal of content analysis is “to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study” (Downe-Wambolt, 1992, p. 314). In the process of conducting qualitative content analysis, the researcher condenses raw data into categories or themes based on inference and interpretation. Researchers can accomplish this process inductively, allowing categories to emerge directly from the data, or deductively, using existing theory and research to guide the data analysis. In QCA, it is common that researchers use both data-driven and concept-driven analysis (Schreier, 2012). For example, QCA researchers may initially turn to existing theory or research to develop their main themes or categories; this is the concept-driven part of the data analysis process. However, once the researcher begins collecting data, he or she may examine the material for what participants say and do with respect to these main themes or categories. Using memos and constant comparison, researchers then create subcategories or subthemes that emerge from the data. When researchers draw directly on the data to discover themes and meanings, they refer to their analysis as data-driven (Schreier, 2012).

In this study, I used both deductive and inductive analysis procedures to help me describe the phenomenon of student engagement in social studies learning activities. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) describe this mix of concept and data-driven content analysis as *directed content analysis*. While I used self-determination theory and its themes of autonomy, competence and relatedness

initially to focus my research, I turned to my data to understand how teachers supported these needs in their classrooms, and how students perceived these classroom contexts as engaging or not. This aspect of my analysis was data-driven.

Qualitative content analysis can be used to analyze any type of recorded communication such as interview and focus group transcripts, observation notes and transcripts, student work samples, written lesson plans; essentially anything that is written. Accordingly, QCA involves a specific sequence of steps that researchers must follow. These steps include: (1) preparing the data; (2) defining the unit of analysis; (3) developing categories and a coding scheme; (4) testing your coding scheme on a sample of text; (5) coding all the text; (6) assessing your coding consistency; (7) drawing conclusions from the coded data; and (8) reporting your methods and findings.

I followed this process throughout the study as I analyzed my data. The most critical aspect of this process was the development of the coding frame. A coding frame is a way of structuring the research material. It consists of main categories that specify relevant aspects of the study and of subcategories within each main category that specify relevant meanings for those aspects of the research (Schreier, 2012). In Chapter 3, I take readers through the QCA process in detail. By using QCA, I hoped to develop themes and categories to make student engagement in social studies visible.

### **Significance of the Study**

Research supports the conviction that academic engagement is essential for learning, and that remaining engaged in academic work is an important outcome of schooling (National Research Council, 2004; Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Fredericks, 2004). However, the pervasiveness



of adolescent disaffection with academic learning, particularly in the discipline of social studies, underscores the need to support teachers in their efforts to develop engaging classroom contexts that meet their students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness.

Currently, little research exists on how teachers support their students' motivation to learn (L.H. Anderman et al., 2011). The aim of this study was to discover how social studies teachers can facilitate their students' engagement in academic work.

Theory and research have linked student engagement to teacher supportiveness and warmth (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Fredericks et al., 2004; Marks, 2000), instructional approaches that require student interactions, facilitate discussion or encourage students to express their viewpoints (Andermann et al., 2011, Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Guthrie et al., 2012) and strategies that promote in-depth inquiry and metacognition (King, et al., 2010). However, few studies examine academic engagement from the perspectives of students and teachers in social studies classrooms (Anderman et al., 2011; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). This qualitative case study of two secondary social studies classrooms explored how teachers foster (or hinder) student engagement in social studies through the experiences they provide for their students. The study's rich and varied vignettes take readers into classrooms to experience engagement in social studies learning. These descriptions could provide teachers, who may be hesitant to alter deeply entrenched practices or who are skeptical of theory and research, with models for how to implement engaging instructional contexts.

Teachers often describe the presence of engagement in behavioral terms, "I know it when I see it!" (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012, p. 745), and teachers are often evaluated based on whether their students look engaged. However, the significance of students' emotional, cognitive and psychological engagement for learning suggests that when it comes to engagement, *there is*

*far more than what is visible to the human eye.* While learning which classroom contexts can support or hinder student engagement is important, knowing *why* those contexts engage (or disengage) students will help teachers justify their instructional choices and create strategies that build off those same theories. Understanding how pedagogical decisions affect student beliefs about autonomy, competence and relatedness is essential for effective teaching. Yet, telling social studies teachers that they need to engage their students, or providing teachers with professional development on instructional strategies that promise to engage students, are not nearly as effective as showing educators what engagement in social studies learning looks and sounds like.

While there are many implications of this study for secondary social studies teachers, this study has considerable implications for teacher education. Teacher educator programs are often criticized for providing prospective teachers with too much theory and not enough practical applications of those theories (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Kansanen, 1991). By integrating this case study into social studies methods courses, both novice and veteran teachers can evaluate the effectiveness of classroom contexts and strategies for engaging students in social studies learning.

In addition to methods courses, there is a great demand for professional development for teachers in motivation and engagement. While in graduate school, most teachers may not have learned about these critical issues (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2012). Cleary (2009) found that 41% of teachers indicated that they did not feel that they received sufficient training to put self-determination theory into practice in their classrooms. This study can be used as a springboard in teacher education courses or professional development workshops on practical applications of self-determination theory in social studies classrooms.

Curriculum developers may also find this study significant. A better understanding of how the engagement construct plays out in classrooms may encourage developers to design more effective interventions for engaging students in social studies, rather than design content and instruction primarily for emotional or affective engagement (interest, fun, enjoyment). In addition to creating interesting activities, social studies curriculum developers may need to consider how teachers' curriculum and instruction supports students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. This research study, and the motivation and engagement theories that guide it, suggests that curriculum developers ask not only, "What do we want students to be able to know and do?" but perhaps more importantly, "Can our students positively answer the questions, 'Can I do this?' 'Do I want to do this, and why' and 'Do I belong?'"

This study is relevant to the social studies education community. However, it also adds to the growing body of literature on the engagement construct and its practical considerations for teaching and learning. Much of the research on motivation and engagement has been conducted within the field of educational psychology, which seeks a greater understanding of the causal relationships among facilitators, indicators and outcomes of student engagement. Primarily, researchers use quantitative studies to measure these direct or indirect relationships. Specific and measurable data on how different motivational constructs affect learner outcomes is critical for understanding the role of motivation and engagement in learning. Yet, understanding how students experience social studies learning, how they respond to changes in classroom contexts, how they become interested in social studies content, and how and why that interest either grows or dissipates over time is also critically important when engagement is conceived of as both a means to student achievement and also a desired outcome of schooling. Thus, this research study

seeks to extend an evolving line of inquiry that investigates how student engagement in academic work, specifically social studies learning, might be more effectively promoted and supported.

### **Delimitations**

In this research study, I examined engagement in social studies learning in two social studies classrooms in grades eight and eleven. The timeframe for this study was September 2014 to February 2015. The choice to include middle and upper school classrooms was intentional. I juxtaposed the contexts and engagement in middle learning social studies with the classroom contexts and engagement in upper learning program to discover similarities and differences in student engagement across grade levels. Interestingly, John Dewey noted that in his laboratory school, teachers were less able to engage older students in experiential learning because of the intense preparation for college exams (Mayhew & Edwards, 1936). I was interested to learn how teachers and their students perceived engagement in learning social studies in different grade levels and whether or not student engagement in social studies differed due to pressures of testing and college admissions.

In addition to limitations on the grades and timeframe for this study, there were also limitations on which teachers could participate. The principals in the middle and upper schools consulted with their teachers to choose who would participate in this study. The selection criteria were simple; the teachers had to teach a full-year social studies course and be willing to participate. I chose to limit the number of teachers to two as a matter of convenience and logistics. In addition, each teacher has between 10 and 19 students per class. Only those students who signed the student assent form and whose parents signed the parental consent were included in this study. I collected data during weekly visits to each classroom, during structured

interviews with teachers, and during focus groups with students. These delimitations are explored in more depth in the discussion of methodology in Chapters 3.

### **Definitions**

*Student Engagement with Academic Work* – For this study, I turned to Skinner and Pitzer’s (2012) definition of student engagement with academic work as: “constructive, enthusiastic, willing, emotionally-positive, and cognitively focused participation in with learning activities in school” (p. 22). This definition encompasses emotional, cognitive and behavioral dimensions of student engagement with learning activities, and suggests that all three are necessary for engagement with academic work.

*Engagement* – This study uses Skinner & Pitzer’s (2012) motivational conceptual model of engagement and disaffection. Engagement is conceived as a multifaceted construct, that includes behavioral, emotional and cognitive dimensions or indicators.

*Behavioral Engagement* – Fredericks et al. (2004) describes behavioral engagement in learning and academic tasks as demonstrating effort, persistence, concentration, attention, asking questions, and contributing to class discussions.

*Emotional Engagement* – Within the context of classroom learning, researchers use the term emotional or affective engagement to describe students’ levels of interest, enjoyment, happiness, boredom and anxiety during academic work (Ainley, 2012, Appleton et al., 2008; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012)

*Cognitive Engagement* – Studies of cognitive engagement typically examine students’ psychological investment (Fredericks et al., 2004). Students who are cognitively engaged seek out challenges (Connell & Wellborn, 1991), use strategies to master academic content (Lam,

Wong, Yang & Liu, 2012) and exhibit what Newmann (1996) refers to as “authentic intellectual work” (see Theoretical Perspective).

*Motivation* – Newmann (1989) characterizes motivation as the drive, the beliefs and the reasons why one seeks (or does not seek) achievement-related outcomes. Motivation is juxtaposed with engagement, which Newmann defines as involving participation, connection, attachment and integration in certain tasks or settings. Motivation is referred to as “any force that energizes and directs behavior,” whereas engagement is “the extent of a student’s active involvement in a learning activity” (Reeve, 2012, p. 150)

*Competence* – Competence is defined within self-determination theory as the psychological need to be effective in one’s learning and activities, to seek out and master challenges (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

*Autonomy* – Autonomy is defined within self-determination theory as the psychological need to experience one’s behavior as self-directed or the need to express one’s authentic self (Deci & Ryan, 1985)

*Relatedness* – Relatedness is defined within self-determination theory as the psychological need to establish close, emotional connections with others; the desire to be involved in warm and caring relationships (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

In Chapter 1, the introduction to my research study, I discussed the importance of student engagement as both a means to achievement and as an outcome of education. While a great deal is known about the student engagement construct, there is much to discover from teachers and students about their experiences with engagement in social studies learning. I explained the

theoretical and conceptual frameworks for the study and made the case for why this study is significant to the education community.

The remainder of the study is organized into five additional chapters, references and appendixes in the following manner. In Chapter 2, I present a review of the related literature on student engagement, the potential of the concept for teaching and learning, engagement in social studies, and implications for engagement putting research and theory into practice. In Chapter 3, I provide the details of the research design and methodology of the study. The context for the study, the researcher's role in the study and the strategies for data collection and analysis are described. In Chapters 4 and 5, I review what I found when I looked for student engagement in these two classrooms. I organize my findings by case; I share my findings on student engagement in Lisa Randall's 8<sup>th</sup> grade classroom in Chapter 4, and I describe my findings on student engagement in Emmett Blackwell's 11<sup>th</sup> grade classroom in Chapter 5. Throughout Chapter 6, I present my analysis of the findings and offers implications for the study. The study concludes with the references and appendices.

### **Summary**

Student engagement in academic work is critical, both for school achievement and for life-long learning. The significance of student engagement is especially true in the discipline of social studies, that seeks to develop students who are “democratically enlightened” and “politically engaged” (Parker, 2008). While laws may require that students attend school, the self-regulation, energy, effort and persistence required to develop “enlightened political engagement” cannot be legislated – it must come from the students themselves. Despite the abundance of literature on what educational contexts are most likely to engage students in

learning, the prevalence of disengagement among adolescents in middle and high schools suggests that engaging students in academic work is perhaps easier said than done. Drawing on research and theories on motivation and engagement, this qualitative case study sought a greater understanding, from the perspectives of teachers and students, of how student engagement in learning social studies “works when it works.” By describing teachers and students experiences with student engagement in real classroom settings, I hoped to provide educators with a rich and user-friendly understanding of how student engagement can be developed and sustained.

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Ironically, close observations of most any secondary school in America reveal that adolescents – both at-risk and high functioning – often display remarkably high degrees of motivation and engagement within the school setting. Rarely, however, does this occur in the classroom.

~ Pianta et al., 2012, p. 369

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand how and why adolescent learners engage (or disengage) in social studies learning and how social studies teachers may promote and sustain their students’ engagement in academic work. Throughout this literature review, I explore current theories and research on adolescent motivation and engagement, connect those theories and research findings to this investigation into adolescent engagement in social studies learning, and uncover what additional research might help educators and practitioners better understand student engagement in social studies learning.

To help frame this review of the literature, I turn to the Skinner-Pitzer (2012) dynamic model of motivational development (see *Figure 2*). According to this model, classroom contexts,



characterized by warmth (vs. rejection), structure (vs. chaos) and self-determined learning experiences (vs. coercion), are more likely to support students' psychological needs for autonomy, competency and relatedness. When teachers fulfill these needs, students are more likely to have the motivational basis to engage (emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally) with learning activities. Through this model, Skinner and Pitzer (2012) explain how classroom contexts influence student motivation, which, in turn, fuels engagement.

Despite what is currently known about what types of contexts can motivate students to engage in learning, little is known about how engaging contexts are “put into practice” in secondary social studies classrooms and “what works when it works” when it comes to engagement in social studies learning activities. In other words, what do warm, structured and self-determined learning experiences look, sound and feel like in secondary social studies classrooms? How do teachers create these learning experiences for their students?

The primary research question guiding this study was: “How do secondary social studies teachers promote and sustain their students' engagement in learning activities?” In order to understand how social studies teachers promote and sustain their students' engagement, I explored an additional question that draws on the motivation and engagement processes that Skinner and Pitzer (2012) outline in their model. This related question was: “How do teachers support their students' needs for autonomy, competency and relatedness in academic work?”

I organized the following literature review around Skinner and Pitzer's (2012) dynamic model of motivation (see *Figure 2*). As such, I reviewed current understandings about: (1) how classroom-level student engagement in academic work is conceptualized; (2) how motivation influences student engagement; (3) how adolescent development affects motivation and engagement; (4) how classroom contexts support or hinder student motivation and engagement;

and (5) how research on motivation and engagement might apply to student engagement in social studies learning.

### **Conceptualizing Student Engagement**

Researchers initiated studies of student engagement as a response to concerns about high levels of school dropouts in the mid-1980s (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). During the past few decades, with increasing concerns over potential consequences of disengagement (e.g. inappropriate behavior, apathy, truancy, dropping out), research on student engagement has intensified (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). The appeal of the student engagement construct becomes universal when conceptualized as both a direct pathway to school achievement, and a highly valued outcome of schooling. Thus, the concept of student engagement continues to generate a great deal of interest among educators as a potential remedy for low levels of academic achievement, high levels of student boredom and high dropout rates in urban communities (Christenson, et al., 2012b; Fredericks, et al., 2004; National Research Council, 2004).

Defining the concept of student engagement is problematic because no consensus exists on what counts as engagement. For example, Merriam Webster's dictionary defines *engagement* as "emotional involvement" or "commitment," while the American Heritage dictionary defines the word *engage* as being "actively committed," "to attract and hold the attention of, to engross," and to "draw into, to involve." Some academics conceptualize student engagement as a psychological process, "the attention, interest, investment, and effort students expend in the work of learning" (Marks, 2000, p. 155). Others argue that student engagement is about relationships. "Whether two people choose to become engaged by embarking on a permanent and intimate relationship, or two forces engage in a battle by entering a violent and confrontational

relationship, the necessary component of engagement is a relationship; engagement cannot be achieved or accomplished by oneself” (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012, p. 746).

Although the editors of the most recent *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* (Christenson et al., 2012) acknowledge the challenges of defining the concept of engagement, they conclude the handbook by offering the following definition:

Student engagement refers to the student’s active participation in academic and co-curricular or school-related activities, and commitment to educational goals and learning. Engaged students find learning meaningful, and are invested in their learning and future. It is a multidimensional construct that consists of behavioral (including academic), cognitive and affective subtypes. Student engagement drives learning; requires energy and effort; is affected by multiple influences; and can be achieved for all learners.

(Christenson, et al., 2012a, p. 817)

For the purposes of this study, I used Skinner and Pitzer’s (2012) definition of student engagement in academic work, which is “constructive, enthusiastic, willing, emotionally positive, and cognitively focused participation with learning activities in school” (p. 22). Regardless of how researchers define the concept, student engagement is most commonly understood in terms of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (Fredericks, et al., 2004).

Many empirical studies of student engagement in academic work focus on one or more of these three dimensions (Marks, 2000). However, Fredericks et al. (2004) argue for refocusing engagement research, from studies of individual subtypes of engagement to research that examines engagement as a multidimensional construct. A multidimensional construct for engagement integrates, in one form or another, behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement

as dynamically interrelated within individuals (Christenson et al., 2012; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). “The study of engagement as multidimensional and as an interaction between the individual and the environment promises to help us to better understand the complexity of children’s experiences in school and to design more specifically targeted and nuanced interventions” (Fredericks, et al., 2004, p. 61).

### **Behavioral Engagement**

Research on behavioral engagement in academic work examines the degree to which students take an active role in classroom learning. Finn (1989) defines behavioral engagement as four levels of participation, that range from simply responding to the teacher’s directions to activities that require student initiative. Demonstrations of initiative, it is assumed, present a qualitative difference in engagement in terms of greater commitment to the school or task. Student effort, persistence, perseverance, concentration, contributing to class discussions, and asking questions characterize behavioral engagement. This public form of engagement is most often measured through observations of classroom participation and task involvement, student self-report surveys and teacher surveys that inquire into classroom conduct, time on task, and participation (Fredericks et al., 2004).

### **Emotional Engagement**

Emotional engagement in academic work refers to students’ positive affective reactions in the classroom, that may include enthusiasm, pride, interest, happiness, and satisfaction (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). This dimension of engagement refers to students’ attitudes toward and feelings about learning, and suggests a student’s willingness to do the work (because it is

interesting or fun). Unlike behavioral engagement, emotional engagement is not easily observed. Therefore, emotional engagement is assessed primarily through student self-report surveys that measure the extent to which students enjoy and are interested in learning activities (Fredericks et al., 2004). Fredericks et al. (2004) note that emotional engagement measures can be problematic because they rarely specify the source of the students' emotions, or gather specific information about the students' interests in or value for the learning. To obtain a more accurate understanding of students' emotional engagement, researchers may use experience-sampling techniques that examine the extent to which the engagement is related to specific contextual factors (Fredericks et al., 2004).

### **Cognitive Engagement**

Research on cognitive engagement looks to studies of student investment in academic learning and achievement. Brophy (2010) defines this type of engagement as a *motivation to learn*, or “a student’s tendency to find learning activities meaningful and worthwhile and to try to get the intended benefits from them” (p. 208). Cognitive engagement in academic work encompasses the students’ “heads-on” participation, and is characterized by students going beyond what is required. Students who are cognitively engaged in learning activities ask questions for clarification of concepts. They try to master classroom content with the goal of learning rather than gaining a shallow or surface understanding for the purpose of taking tests (Ainley, 2012). The measures of cognitive engagement are limited (Fredericks et al., 2004). Survey items may inquire into students’ strategy use, problem solving and preference for hard work. Like emotional engagement, cognitive engagement is difficult to observe. However, when cognitive engagement is conceived as the motivational construct of self-regulated learning,

researchers often use self-report questionnaires to investigate students' metacognitive strategies, as well as how students think (Greene, Miller, Crowson, Duke, & Akey, 2004).

### **Searching for Conceptual Consensus**

A general agreement exists among researchers on this “tripartite dimensionality of engagement” (Ainley, 2012, p. 284). However, potential overlaps between behavioral, emotional and cognitive aspects of engagement suggest the field is far from reaching definitional and conceptual consensus. For example, emotional engagement is most often defined in terms of interest, values and goals (Fredericks et al., 2004); feelings of belonging (Appleton, et al., 2008; Finn, 1989); and identification with school (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Some researchers, however, refer to student interest and value for academic work as cognitive engagement (Appleton, et al., 2008), while other researchers define cognitive engagement as “motivation, effort and strategy use” (Fredericks et al., 2004, p. 64). In addition, some researchers refer to feelings of belonging, identification and interpersonal relations as psychological engagement, while others consider interest to be a subset of motivation (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). The discrepancies among researchers about how to define the various subtypes of student engagement can limit study comparisons and the conclusions that can be reached through research (Block, 2000).

In addition to definitional debates, disagreements among researchers about how many components should be considered in the student engagement metaconstruct continue to confound any consensus on the construct. While much of the literature suggests three components – emotional, cognitive and behavioral engagement – that build on one another in a linear fashion, Reeve (2012) suggests that there should be a fourth dimension – agentic engagement – added to

the metaconstruct. Agentic engagement is described as the students' "intentional, proactive, and constructive contribution into the flow of the instruction they receive" (p. 161). Reeve (2012) suggests that students can act on assigned instructional tasks to increase their chances of being motivated and experiencing meaningful learning. For example, when students ask questions, communicate their interests, or express their opinions, they are demonstrating agentic engagement. Reeve (2012) argues that infusing student agency into the current three-component model of engagement highlights the importance of autonomy-supportive classrooms. When students act on their own motivational needs, they do not have to sit back passively and wait for teachers to provide autonomy support; they can create their own.

While descriptions and numbers of engagement subtypes vary among researchers, there are also disagreements over how the various dimensions of student engagement might relate to one another. Some researchers posit that there is a hierarchy among the various subtypes of engagement. Research appears to support the idea that emotional and cognitive changes in engagement precede the more observable, behavioral changes (Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Wylie & Hodgen, 2012). Wang & Holcombe (2010) suggest that it is likely that strong school identification (emotional engagement) leads to greater use of metacognitive strategies (cognitive engagement) and increased participation in school (behavioral engagement). Although behavioral engagement appears to be most closely associated with increases in academic achievement, emotional engagement is likely the "fuel" necessary to spark the kind of behavioral and cognitive engagement that leads to high-quality learning (Skinner, Marchand, Furrer, & Kindermann, 2008; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

Despite the many unresolved issues and questions related to the student engagement concept, there are some common assumptions throughout the literature: 1) student engagement in

academic work represents a direct pathway to learning and scholastic development (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012); 2) researchers appear to agree that student engagement itself is a desired outcome of education. Engaged students do more than succeed in school; they demonstrate effort, persist when confronted by challenges, ask clarifying and insightful questions, push themselves to succeed and seek to master learning rather than simply demonstrate competence (Klem & Connell, 2004); and 3) engagement is not a fixed trait or attributable only to select students. Rather, student engagement in academic work is an alterable state of being that is highly influenced by the contexts teachers provide in their classrooms (Ainley, 2012; Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Researchers suggest strongly that interactions between students and classroom contexts can support or hinder academic engagement. Therefore, engagement is amenable to improvement via pedagogy and other interventions (Lawson & Lawson, 2013).

Thus, a consensus exists among researchers that student engagement is critical for learning and achievement, is a worthwhile goal of education, and is susceptible to change within supportive classroom contexts. Building on these assumptions, I examined the interactions between students and social studies academic work to understand how these interactions supported or hindered students' engagement in social studies learning. I conceptualized student engagement as a multidimensional construct consisting of emotional, cognitive and behavioral dimensions, and drew on Skinner and Pitzer's (2012) indicators of these dimensions (see *Figure 3*) when examining student engagement in the classrooms.



### Engagement as Related to Motivation

Although there is a consensus within the research literature that motivation plays a critical role in fostering student engagement in academic work, the relationship between engagement and motivation continues to be a subject of debate (Appleton, et al., 2008; Christenson, et al., 2012a). While some of the literature treats engagement and motivation as synonymous (National Research Council, 2004), other sources view them as different, but related, constructs. For example, Newmann (1989) characterizes motivation as the drive, the beliefs and the reasons why one seeks (or does not seek) achievement-related outcome. In contrast, Newmann describes engagement as involving participation, connection, attachment and integration in certain tasks or settings. Similarly, Reeve (2012) describes motivation as “any force that energizes and directs behavior,” and engagement as “the extent of a student’s active involvement in a learning activity” (p. 150). The literature commonly juxtaposes motivation and engagement with terms such as intent vs. action (J. Russell, Ainley, & Frydenberg, 2005), inward vs. outward (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012) and as privately experienced vs. publicly observed (Reeve, 2012).

Despite similar depictions of motivation as *intent* and engagement as *action*, the lines between the two constructs are often blurred. For example, Finn & Zimmer (2012) liken motivation to emotional engagement, as both represent internal states that provide the impetus for students to participate in certain academic behaviors. Other researchers argue that motivation and cognitive engagement are similar because both constructs focus on students’ use of self-regulation and metacognition strategies (Wolters & Taylor, 2012). Although clear delineations between motivation and engagement are problematic, researchers appear to agree that student motivation precedes and influences engagement (Christenson, et al., 2012a).

Self-determination theorists outline a process through which motivation influences engagement. Self-determination theory assumes that all students, regardless of age, gender, socioeconomic status or nationality, possess innate growth tendencies, such as intrinsic motivation, curiosity and psychological needs. When supportive learning contexts satisfy these needs, students develop a motivational foundation from which high-quality classroom engagement and positive school functioning can emerge (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Reeve, 2012; Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Many motivation theorists explain how students' expectations, goals and values affect student engagement. However, self-determination theorists identify students' inner motivational forces and offer teachers recommendations for instructional strategies that can activate these internal motivational forces to facilitate high-quality student engagement (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Self-determination theory posits that individuals have basic psychological needs for *autonomy, competence and relatedness* (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). Students experience autonomy when they internalize the purpose of what they are doing and believe that their behaviors and their learning are self-directed and self-initiated rather than externally controlled or coerced (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The need for autonomy suggests that students want psychological freedom to learn – to have some choices over what and how they learn. Students experience competence when they believe they have control over their ability to learn and that they can be effective in mastering challenges (Dweck, 2006). In other words, students need to feel that they can be successful and see themselves as capable rather than incompetent. Relatedness is the need for warm, caring relationships with others in the classroom, such as peers and teachers. Students naturally seek out teachers and environments where they feel respected and cared for as opposed to rejected or isolated (Pianta, et al., 2012).

When students feel autonomous, competent and related to others in the classroom, they are more likely to demonstrate *intrinsic motivation* (Deci & Ryan, 2002). When intrinsically motivated, students will participate in academic work without regard to any external reward; they engage in activities for the sake of the activities themselves. In contrast, students are extrinsically motivated when they work on an activity in order to gain a separate reward (e.g. good grades, a homework pass, extra recess) that is dependent on their behavior; thus, the reward fully controls the behavior. “When extrinsically motivated, people engage in activities because the activities are instrumental; that is, they are means to desired ends” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 64). Self-determination theorists suggest that moving students’ sources of motivation from extrinsic and controlled to more autonomous forms of motivation can lead to greater engagement in academic work.

Deci and Ryan (2002) describe students’ movement toward self-determination along a continuum from actions and choices that are fully controlled by external factors to self-determined activity choices propelled by autonomous decision-making. With each phase along this continuum, the students’ sources of motivation shift from extrinsic to intrinsic as their actions become more self-determined.


Behavior	<div style="display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: space-between;"> <span>Not Self Determined</span>  <span>Self Determined</span> </div>					
Type of Motivation	Amotivation	Extrinsic Motivation				Intrinsic Motivation
Type of Regulation	Non-Regulation	External Regulation	Introjected Regulation	Identified Regulation	Integrated Regulation	Intrinsic Regulation
	Student is not motivated, perceives academic work is not relevant.	Student is motivated to engage solely from desire to earn reward or avoid punishment	Student is motivated to act either to avoid shame & guilt (e.g. parental disapproval) or to gain pride (e.g. parental approval).	Student identifies with and accepts the external value of the academic work (attaches personal importance like get into college)	Student has fully integrated the value of the activity, sees it as meeting his needs to achieve autonomy, competence and relatedness.	Student finds personal interest, enjoyment and inherent satisfaction in learning & doing the academic work.
Locus of Causality	Impersonal	External	Somewhat External	Somewhat Internal	Internal	Internal

Figure 4. Types of motivation characterized in organismic integration theory, a sub-theory of self-determination theory. Adapted from A Self-determination Theory Perspective on Student Engagement by Johnmarshall Reeve (2012) in Handbook of Research on Student Engagement, p. 154.

At the controlled end of the continuum, students demonstrate *external regulation*, during which their motives to engage in activities come solely from the desire to earn a reward or avoid punishment. The next type of motivation is *introjected regulation*, during which the students are motivated to act either to avoid anxiety (e.g. parental disapproval or bad grades) or to gain pride (e.g. parental approval, good grades). A more autonomous type of extrinsic motivation, referred to as *identified regulation*, occurs when students identify with the utility of an activity. For example, a student who engages in class because he has attached a personal importance to the

activity, such as the need to get into college or to get a good job, demonstrates identified regulation. The most autonomous type of extrinsic motivation is *integrated regulation*. When students have integrated the value of activities, and they believe these activities meet their needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, they demonstrate integrated regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2002). With integrated regulation, the students' motivation to engage in the activity remains extrinsic rather than intrinsic, because the students do not engage in learning for the sake of the activity itself. However, students exhibiting integrated regulation do not feel coerced into learning or participating in tasks. Instead, they choose to participate because they recognize and appreciate the value of the task or activity.

Identifying the sources of student motivation is central to facilitating student learning. Otis et al. (2005) followed a group of students from eighth to tenth grade; each year, researchers asked the students "Why do you go to school?" The students' responses fell along Deci and Ryan's (2002) intrinsic/extrinsic continuum: "Because I experience pleasure and satisfaction while learning new things" (intrinsic motivation); "Because I value the learning I get from school" (integrated regulation); "Because I think education will help me prepare for a career" (identified regulation); "Because I don't want to disappoint my parents" (introjected regulation); "Because I want to make more money in my career someday" (external regulation), and "I don't see any reason to go to school," (amotivation). Across all three years, students were much more likely to say that they went to school for career preparation and access to higher salaries than for pursuing their interests or the satisfaction of learning. Few students reported having what self-determination theory researchers labeled as integrated or identified regulation or intrinsic motivation.

Brophy (2010) argues that the “primary motivational issues facing teachers are not about *intrinsic motivation*, but are about helping students come to appreciate the value of school learning activities” (p. 156). He suggests that teachers find ways to shift students’ sources of motivation from external and introjected (controlled) regulation to identified and integrated (more autonomous) regulation. Research findings support this recommendation. In one experiment (Ryan, et al., 1995), college students were asked to do a highly uninteresting activity. Researchers manipulated three variables – providing versus not providing a meaningful rationale for the activity, acknowledging versus not acknowledging the students’ feelings that the task was boring, and emphasizing choice versus coercing the students into doing the activity. Findings revealed that all three factors – providing a rationale, acknowledging the students’ negative feelings and allowing for choice – moved the students toward a more autonomous, less controlled source of motivation.

Self-determination theorists suggest that individuals seek ways to fulfill their needs for autonomy, competency and relatedness through interactions with their environment. When students perceive that their school supports these fundamental needs, their engagement in learning is enhanced (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 2002; Reeve, 2012). For example, students who believe that their learning is autonomous rather than controlled are more apt to enjoy learning activities (emotional engagement), show initiative and ask questions (behavioral engagement), and push themselves to learn beyond what is required (cognitive engagement) (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Patrick, Skinner, & Connell, 1993). Students who believe that they have control over their ability to be successful during learning activities are more likely to persist when faced with adversity and pursue learning for mastery rather than memorizing content for a test (Skinner, et al., 2008). When students feel valued and supported by their

teachers and fellow classmates, they tend to pay more attention, participate more in discussions, and do more work than what is required of them (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). Thus, when students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are satisfied during learning activities in the classroom, their natural tendencies to seek out challenges, explore innate curiosities and pursue learning are more likely to emerge (Reeve, 2012).

Yet, while motivation is necessary for student engagement, it is not sufficient (Appleton, et al., 2008). Motivation is highly influenced by contextual factors that can positively or negatively affect students' perceptions of their experiences of autonomy, competency and relatedness. These perceptions can, in turn, positively or negatively influence student engagement (Lam, et al., 2012). Thus, identifying classroom contexts that support and nurture adolescents' beliefs about their autonomy, competence and relatedness is critical for activating motivation and developing student engagement (Wentzel, 2012).

Throughout this case study, I gathered data that shed light on the teachers' beliefs about the purposes for learning, how the teachers conveyed these purposes to their students, and how students' perceptions of the teachers' purposes for learning affected their perceptions of autonomy, competency and relatedness in the classroom. Through observations, interviews, reflections and focus groups, I explored students' sources of motivation and how these sources of motivation related to the types of classroom contexts their teachers provide.

### **Student Engagement and Adolescent Development**

Identifying classroom contexts that support adolescents' needs requires an understanding of adolescent development. Adolescence marks a turning point for many students with respect to engagement in academic work. A review of the literature on adolescent motivation reveals that

many students experience declines in interest in school (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002); declines in intrinsic motivation and self-concept of ability (Harter, 1981); a perceived loss of positive, supportive relationships with teachers and peers (Wentzel, 1998); decreased competency beliefs (Stipek, 2002); declines in domain-specific attitudes (E. M. Anderman & Maehr, 1994); and an overall decline in student engagement during the transition to junior high school (Eccles et al., 1993).

Adults often attribute these “problems of adolescence” to the many physical, social and emotional changes that arise during puberty. However, attributing adolescents’ lack of motivation to physical or psychological changes within the students themselves assumes that motivation and engagement are fixed individual traits. In contrast, researchers who study adolescent motivation in schools argue that motivation and engagement are malleable states that are highly receptive to learning contexts (Christenson et al., 2012a). The notion that motivation can be cultivated suggests that adolescent motivation need not be viewed as a problem, perpetrated by the students themselves, but rather as a worthwhile goal that secondary school teachers can achieve by providing supportive learning contexts.

Researchers suggest that the major declines in adolescents’ expectations for and interest in various school subjects occur, in large part, from a “developmentally inappropriate shift in the types of classroom and teacher characteristics as they move into secondary school” (Eccles & Wang, 2012). Eccles and Midgley (1993) refer to this mismatch between the needs of many adolescents’ and the learning contexts available to fulfill these needs as a poor *stage-environment fit*. Although adolescent declines in engagement are most pronounced during the transition from elementary to middle school, research on student engagement in high school



suggests that a poor stage-environment fit persists throughout the schooling experience (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012).

Adolescents' socio-cognitive development is best characterized by a strong sense of autonomy, independence, self-determination and social interactions (Eccles, et al., 1993). However, the typical middle school is characterized by few opportunities for students to make their own decisions, excessive rules and discipline, poor teacher-student relationships, homogenous grouping by ability and stricter grading policies than those in the elementary school years (E.M. Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Newmann et al., 2010).

With the transition from elementary to secondary schools, students experience environments and learning contexts that emphasize competition and social and academic comparison just as they are developing a heightened sense of self-awareness (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). In addition, rather than support adolescents' increased desire for control and independence, middle schools often restrict the opportunities that students have to make decisions or choices (Reeve, 2004). Responding to standardized curricula and high stakes tests, teachers often present lower-level cognitive content to adolescents, many of whom are beginning to develop the ability and desire to use higher level cognitive skills (King, et al., 2010). To help maintain order and control, many teachers discourage social interactions in the classroom; however, research suggests that adolescents' relationships with their peers facilitate a sense of relatedness that is necessary for engagement (Anderman & Maehr, 1994). Additionally, the transition to middle school often features more formal and distant teacher-student relationships when what students need are close relationships with adults other than their parents, and safe, warm, learning environments to support their desire to try new and challenging tasks and activities (Eccles & Wang, 2012).

Importantly, standards-based learning and high-stakes testing tend to foster a reliance on extrinsic motivation that can create dissonance between adolescents' development and their learning environments (Mahatmya, Lohman, Matjasko, & Farb, 2012). The increased emphasis on competition and evaluation of student performance from elementary through high school may, in part, contribute to the documented decline in students' motivation as students' transition into middle school. This focus on competition may also contribute to the decline in students' preference for challenge, curiosity, interest and mastery from elementary to high school (Harter & Jackson, 1992). "Findings from studies of large and diverse samples of middle schools demonstrate that competitive, standards-driven instruction in decontextualized skills and knowledge contributes directly to this sense of alienation and disengagement" (Pianta et al., 2012, p. 367).

Adolescents report that task-related disengagement and alienation in schools are directly tied to classroom experiences that are disconnected from their developmental needs and motivations (Pianta et al., 2012). Perhaps it is no surprise that when students are confronted with a "poor fit," they demonstrate decreases in intrinsic motivation and an overall lack of engagement (Eccles & Wang, 2012; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Rationales supporting the status quo for secondary learning environments range from logistical concerns about the sizes of schools and classrooms and the pressures of testing, to the challenges of covering a loaded curriculum and the dire need for control in a sea of adolescent chaos. However, research findings suggest that declines in adolescent motivation and engagement are not inevitable (Christensen et al., 2012). In the next section, I examine studies of classroom contexts that support adolescents' needs for competency, autonomy and relatedness.

## **Classroom Contexts that Support Student Motivation and Engagement**

Self-determination theory provides a lens for understanding what motivates adolescents to engage (or disengage) in learning. A growing body of research suggests that the instructional climates of classrooms influence students' behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement in academic work, which in turn influences their academic achievement (Ainley, 2012; Eccles & Wang, 2012; Mahaytma et al., 2012; Reeve, 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Findings from these studies have enabled researchers to develop frameworks for how instructional practices and student-teacher relationships can support students' needs for autonomy, competency and relatedness (L. H. Anderman, et al., 2011; Marzano, Pickering, & Heflebower, 2011; Newmann, et al., 1992).

### **Supporting Student Perceptions of Competency**

Much of the literature on competency-supportive classrooms comes from research on classroom goal structures. Researchers who study classroom goal structures examine how teachers organize their classrooms around the purposes of learning. According to achievement goal theory, students generally pursue one of two types of learning goals – performance or mastery. Students who have *performance* goals perceive the purpose of learning as publicly *demonstrating their competence* and outperforming their peers. On the other hand, students with *mastery* goals pursue learning to *develop and acquire competence* (Senko, Hulleman, & Harackiewicz, 2011). Students' goal orientations for learning and academic work can determine the quality of their engagement with academic work (Ames, 1992). When students seek to *develop* competence in the classroom (mastery goals), the quality of cognitive, emotional and behavioral engagement will most likely be higher than in students who seek to *demonstrate*

competence (performance goals) because task mastery goals necessarily require high levels of engagement (Ames, 1990; Anderman & Patrick, 2012; Dweck, 2006).

Teachers who organize their classrooms around a value of learning and understanding, and convey to students that success is measured by personal improvement, are described as having classroom mastery-goal structures. In contrast, a classroom performance-goal structure conveys to students that learning is predominantly a means to achieve recognition, and success is measured by getting good grades as compared to others or by surpassing normative standards (Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Dweck, 2006). “Teachers play an important role in contributing to the classroom goal structures through explicit and implicit messages about the purpose of school activities, what counts as learning, the role of student talk, and through the norms and rules they establish for behavior” (Anderman & Patrick, 2012, p. 181).

Studies of classroom achievement goal structures suggest that how teachers define learning influences student engagement because the implicit or explicit messages about learning affect students’ confidence in their abilities (self-efficacy) to master academic tasks (Ames, 1992; Maehr, 1984; Nicholls, 1989; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Students who perceive their teachers are mastery-goal oriented tend to demonstrate more enjoyment (emotional engagement) and effort (behavioral engagement), and tend to engage in deeper cognitive processing (metacognitive and self-regulation) than do students who perceive their teachers are performance-goal oriented (Ames & Archer, 1988; Wolters, 2004). On the other hand, classroom performance-goal structures have even been shown to be detrimental to student engagement (E. M. Anderman & Patrick, 2012). The focus on competition, grades and social and academic comparison, central to a performance-structured classroom, runs counter to adolescent needs for

a safe environment and caring relationships with teachers, classroom contexts that are necessary to support students' developing competencies (Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

Ames (1990) provides a conceptual framework for teaching principles and instructional strategies that are positively associated with mastery-goal structures. She organizes these strategies into six categories using the acronym TARGET:

- Tasks should be meaningful, challenging, and interesting, and provide a range of options so as not to highlight ability differences;
- Students and teachers should share the Authority and responsibility for making classroom decisions and rules;
- Recognition should be available to all students, and should stress effort and improvement rather than focus on praise for intelligence or encourage social comparison;
- Grouping students within the classroom should be flexible and heterogeneous, rather than by ability, which can often thwart student beliefs about their competence and autonomy;
- Evaluations should be criterion-referenced and authentic rather than summative and disconnected from real-world learning applications, and;
- Time should be flexible to allow for self-pacing and opportunities for learning rather than as a fixed entity, regardless of whether the academic content has been learned or not.

More recently, researchers have added a seventh principle for organizing classrooms around mastery goals. Social relationships highlight the importance of establishing a positive learning climate and respect for student perspectives and opinions. A focus on social relationships recognizes the central role of relatedness in developing student motivation (Patrick, 2001; Turner, 2002). Ames (1990) contends that teachers must implement all of the strategies associated with TARGETS acronym to create a mastery-oriented classroom.

Research on mastery-oriented classrooms supports Ames' contention that mastery learning leads to student engagement. Lam et al. (2012) worked with high school students in China to examine how students' self-efficacy (competence beliefs) and goal orientations (mastery goals and performance goals) influence engagement. With respect to self-efficacy, researchers found that when students believed that they were capable of success when doing challenging academic work (self-efficacy), they became more engaged in learning. When teachers helped students to successfully master challenges, their students' perceptions of their abilities improved, which eventually ignited student engagement in learning (Lam et al., 2012). The more teachers provided optimal structure and scaffolding during learning, and the more they assigned academic work at appropriate levels of difficulty, the more students engaged in academic work.

When measuring for the influence of goal orientations on student engagement, researchers found that mastery goals had the strongest correlation with student engagement (Lam et al., 2012). Although performance-approach goals had a positive correlation with behavioral engagement (though not emotional or cognitive), researchers warned teachers to exercise caution in promoting performance-approach goals in the classroom. Students who are concerned with outscoring others and who view intelligence as fixed rather than malleable, are more likely, as they progress through middle school and into high school, to become more focused on protecting their image and looking competent as compared to other students (Dweck, 1986). When work becomes difficult or challenging, performance-oriented students tend to withdraw from challenging work (performance-avoidance) or even resort to cheating to protect their identities as "smart" (Dweck, 1986). While the research suggests that both mastery and performance goal orientations can lead to positive learning outcomes, it is the students' understanding of the

purposes of learning and their beliefs in their abilities that have the greatest affect on their emotional, cognitive and behavioral engagement (Ames, 1990; Dweck, 2006).

The implications of research on classroom goal structures for this study of student engagement in social studies learning were two-fold. First, I examined classroom contexts described by Ames' (1990) in her TARGETS conceptual model to understand how the teachers support students' competency. Second, by gathering students' perspectives on their teachers' purposes for learning, I gained a greater understanding of how the students' relationships with classroom contexts affects their engagement in social studies learning activities.

### **Supporting Student Perceptions of Relatedness**

Self-determination theory posits that the need to belong and connect with others is universal; however, research suggests that the need for relatedness reaches its peak during adolescence (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Thus, much of the research on adolescents' perceptions of relatedness support in the classroom examines the qualities of students' relationships with teachers and peers. Wang and Holcombe (2010) describe these relationships in terms of how teachers promote discussion in the classroom and the extent to which they provide social support to their students. Teachers who encourage interaction and discussion within a supportive classroom environment help students experience a positive sense of relatedness among their peers. Students who perceive that their teachers encourage interactions and classroom discussion report higher levels of emotional engagement and the use of self-regulatory strategies, or cognitive engagement (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). In addition, when teachers create warm and caring environments, and when they support students both academically and socially, students

are more likely to participate in academic work (behavioral engagement) (Stipek, 2000; Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

Lam et al. (2012) also explored students' perceptions of their relationships with teachers, parents and peers to examine the influence of belonging and connectedness on student engagement in the classroom. They found that teacher support had a stronger association with student engagement than parent or peer support. This finding supports similar research studies that confirm the central role of warm and caring teachers in fostering student engagement in academic work (Anderman et al., 2011; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). According to the High School Study of Student Engagement (HSSSE), a study conducted with more than 40,000 students in 103 high schools across 27 different states, students identified teachers as key factors in their engagement with school and learning (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). Unfortunately, while administrators often judge teacher quality based on standardized outcome measures, "students most often look to teachers for supportive and meaningful relationships" (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012, p. 755). Researchers suggest that from students' perspectives, teacher support appears to have a positive effect on student engagement.

Pianta et al. (2012) suggest that interactions and relationships within classrooms mediate the influence of classroom contexts on motivation and engagement. Student-teacher relationships are the vehicles through which classroom contexts engage developmental processes; thus, relationships with teachers and peers are the activators and organizers of students' needs for autonomy, competency and relatedness (National Research Council, 2004). Supportive relationships with teachers are critical ingredients in student engagement in academic work. Importantly, one of the key features distinguishing at-risk adolescents who succeed in school from those who do not, are positive relationships with adults, primarily teachers (Finn, 1989;



National Research Council, 2004). When teachers provide students with warm and caring social environments, acknowledge and support student perspectives and interests, and remain sensitive to students' needs in the classroom, students report a greater sense of emotional engagement (Pianta et al., 2012).

### **Supporting Student Perceptions of Autonomy**

Assor (2012) describes the need for autonomy as freedom from coercion, having the ability to make decisions, and being encouraged to develop one's values, goals, and interests. Self-determination theorists conceptualize teachers' motivating styles along a continuum that ranges from highly controlling to highly autonomy-supportive (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Reeve et al., 2004). Autonomy-supportive teachers find ways to incorporate students' interests, preferences, curiosity, sense of challenge and desire for choices into lessons. They provide authentic rationales for learning, encourage student perspective taking and support student-initiated decision-making throughout their instruction (Assor, 2012). In contrast, controlling teachers neglect students' intrinsic needs and instead try to create extrinsic motivation through incentives, consequences, directives, deadlines or assignments (Reeve et al., 2004). In general, autonomy-supportive teachers "facilitate, whereas controlling teachers interfere with, the congruence between students' self-determined inner motives and their classroom activity" (Reeve et al., 2004, p. 148).

In classrooms that students perceived as autonomy-supportive as compared to classrooms perceived as controlling, students tend to show greater desire for mastery, higher perceived competency and greater intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Students also experience greater conceptual understanding (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987); and greater persistence in school

(Finn, 1989). When students perceive that there is a rationale for doing academic work, and they have some choice over how they approach and are evaluated on their work, they are able to experience self-directed learning that can lead to a sense of enjoyment in learning or emotional engagement (Assor, 2012).

Wang and Holcombe (2010) argue that teachers can support students' autonomy by providing opportunities for students to participate in classroom decision-making and by allowing for student input into class discussion. In their study of middle school students, these researchers found that support of autonomy was highly effective at increasing students' identification with school (a type of emotional engagement). They also found that there were significant correlations between autonomy support and mastery goal structures. Significantly, however, the researchers did not find a strong correlation between autonomy-support and student participation in academic work (behavioral engagement). Thus, while teachers' support for student autonomy is important, Wang and Holcombe (2010) conclude that it is not sufficient to bring about behavioral engagement in academic work. "Student freedom to design or shape learning without a corresponding focus or commitment to increasing competence or without any kind of accountability to mastery or performance is unlikely on its own to lead to either behavioral engagement or learning" (Wang & Holcombe, 2010, p. 654). Students who feel competent but who are not engaged in lessons may need more autonomy support in the way of interesting or relevant work. In contrast, students who seem anxious about trying new tasks may need more competency-support in the way of explicit instruction in using effective learning strategies and more structured scaffolding of how to be successful (Newmann & Wehlage, 1993; Wang & Holcombe, 2010)

In their study of 822 junior secondary school students from three cities in China, Lam et al. (2012) investigated the relationships between autonomy-supportive classroom contexts, student engagement and learning outcomes. Researchers measured students' perceptions of their teachers' instructional contexts using a list of six key factors of motivating instructional contexts, which includes: 1) challenge; 2) real-life significance; 3) curiosity; 4) autonomy; 5) recognition; and 6) evaluation (Lam, Pak, & Ma, 2007).

Lam et al. (2012) found that student engagement was associated significantly and positively with autonomy-supportive instructional contexts. The more students reported that their teachers assigned challenging work, integrated real-life significance to learning tasks, sparked their curiosity, supported their needs for autonomy, recognized effort and improvement, and used formative evaluation, the more students reported being intrinsically motivated in learning (Lam, 2012). Among the six instructional practices measured, providing students with real-life reasons for learning had the highest correlation with student engagement. The more that students perceived that their teachers integrated real-world significance into academic work, the more the students reported that they were behaviorally, emotionally and cognitively engaged in learning. In addition, of the three dimensions of engagement, emotional engagement (interest, enjoyment, fun, etc.) had the highest correlation with all six of the motivating instructional practices. Emotional engagement, suggests Lam et al. (2012), "may be the engine that drives the other dimensions of engagement" (p. 415).

While autonomy-supportive teaching has been found to increase student engagement, it is not commonly found in practice (Brophy, 2010; Newmann et al., 2010; Reeve, 2004). Despite the benefits of autonomy-supportive over controlling motivating styles for fostering positive learning outcomes, directives to cover content, follow common assessments and timetables, and

pressures to prepare students for high-stakes tests, lead many teachers to use behavior modifications to control student behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2002). In addition, strategies to control students' behaviors are also more familiar to teachers than are strategies to promote and support autonomy (Reeve, 2004).

Reeve et al. (2004) conducted a study to investigate whether a brief professional development workshop could influence teachers' ability and willingness to be more autonomy-supportive, and to determine if student engagement would be sensitive to an experimentally induced change in their teachers' motivational styles. Researchers recruited 20 high school economics, math, English and science teachers, and then rated the teachers' motivating styles on the controlling – autonomy-supportive scale (See *Figure 5*). The teachers initially received an average score of 2.72 on a 7-point scale of autonomy support. Researchers then presented the teachers with professional development training on four aspects of an autonomy-supportive motivating style: 1) nurture students' intrinsic motivation, 2) communicate with non-controlling language, 3) promote valuing for uninteresting academic work, and 4) acknowledge students' negative feelings about academic work (Reeve et al, 2004). Researchers observed teachers on three separate occasions and rated them on the criteria for autonomy support on a 7-point scale (See *Figure 5*). Researchers also observed students to determine their levels of engagement. Engagement measures included students' active involvement during instruction and the extent of students' voice and initiative in taking personal responsibility for their learning.

Teacher's Autonomy Support		
<b>Relies on Extrinsic motivational resources:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incentives, consequences</li> <li>• Directives, deadlines</li> <li>• Makes assignments</li> <li>• Seeks compliance</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	<b>Nurtures Intrinsic motivational resources:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interest, enjoyment</li> <li>• Sense of challenge</li> <li>• Competence support</li> <li>• Choice-making</li> <li>• Curiosity</li> </ul>
<b>Controlling Language:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Controlling, coercive</li> <li>• Should, must, have to</li> <li>• Pressuring, rigid, no nonsense</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	<b>Informational Language:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informational</li> <li>• Flexible</li> <li>• Not at all controlling</li> </ul>
<b>Neglects value, importance of task/lesson/behavior:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neglects meaning, use, benefit, importance</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	<b>Identifies value, importance of task/lesson/behavior:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "This is important because..."</li> </ul>
<b>Reaction to Negative Affect: Is NOT ok, change it</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative affects is unacceptable</li> <li>• Tries to fix, counter or change into something else</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	<b>Reaction to Negative Affect: Is Ok, listens, accepts</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listens carefully</li> <li>• Open to complaints</li> <li>• Accepts as OK, validates reaction</li> </ul>

Figure 5. Observer's rating sheet to score teachers' autonomy support. Adapted from Enhancing Students' Engagement by Increasing Teachers' Autonomy Support by Johnmarshall Reeve, Hyungshim Jang, Dan Carell, Sooyun Jeon, and Jon Barch in *Motivation and Emotion* (28) 2, June 2004, p. 156.

Reeve and his colleagues (2004) found that the teachers who participated in the informational workshops and pursued the independent study on autonomy-supportive teaching were able to teach and motivate their students in more autonomy-supportive ways. They also found that the more teachers used autonomy-supportive instructional behaviors, the more engagement their students demonstrated. Despite the limitations of the study (e.g. small sample size, the potential that teachers altered their instruction to meet rater expectations, and the

potential issues with inter-rater reliability), Reeve et al. (2004) concluded that teachers can learn how to become more autonomy supportive, and that the more autonomy-supportive they become, the more high-quality engagement their students demonstrate.

### **Influence of Contexts on Student Motivation and Engagement**

While a great deal is known about *what* instructional practices and classroom environments support student engagement, little is known about *how* teachers create classroom environments that support students' engagement (L. H. Anderman, et al., 2011). Research on student engagement and motivation tends "to document the importance of instructional contexts while providing little description of how these contexts are created in practice" (L. H. Anderman, et al., 2011, p. 12). Anderman, Andrzejewski and Allen (2011) examined the instructional contexts of four high school teachers (2 social studies and 2 science) whom students identified as being supportive of their engagement and motivation. Researchers conducted classroom observations with the goal of describing the teachers' instructional practices and identifying how these teachers promoted student engagement in their classrooms.

In keeping with self-determination theory and the conceptualization of student engagement as cognitive, emotional and behavioral (Fredericks et al., 2004), Anderman et al. (2011) developed a grounded model based on three core themes of effective teacher behaviors and strategies: 1) supporting understanding (i.e. promoting cognitive engagement and perceptions of competence support); 2) establishing and maintaining rapport (i.e. promoting emotional engagement and perceptions of autonomy-support and relatedness); and 3) managing the classroom (i.e. supporting behavioral engagement and perceptions of relatedness) (See Figure 5).

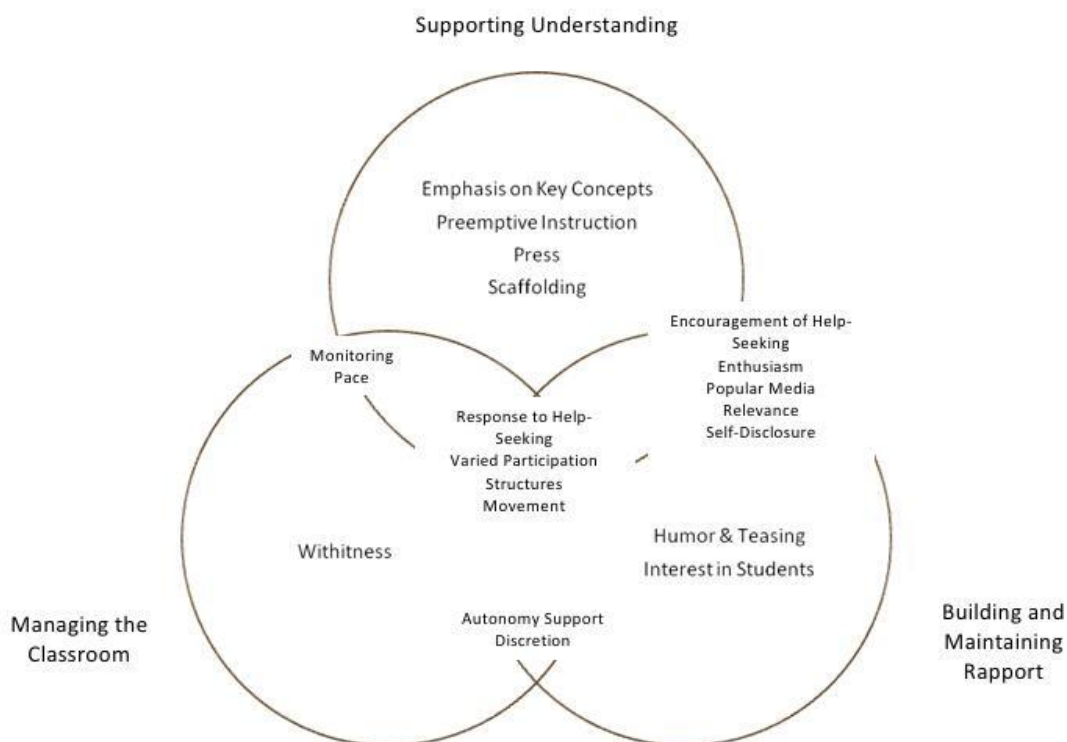


Figure 6. A grounded model of supportive motivational and learning contexts. Adapted from How do teachers support students' motivation and learning in their classrooms? by L. Anderman, C. Andrzejewski, and J. Allen (2011) *Teachers College Record*, 113(5).

The purpose of this research study on student engagement in social studies learning was to understand how classroom contextual factors may support or hinder students' perceptions of their competency, belonging and autonomy that, in turn, positively or negatively influence their emotional, cognitive and behavioral engagement in academic work. I examined the relationships that students developed with their teachers and with the classroom contexts their teachers developed for them. Research establishes that all of these factors determine to some extent how and why students engage in academic work (Wentzel, 2012). Teachers' relationships and interactions with their students can either promote or inhibit students' abilities to engage. The quality of engagement depends on the extent to which teachers provide a caring and supportive

environment (warmth and involvement), offer challenging learning activities with high expectations and clear feedback (optimal structure), and explain why the learning is meaningful and worthwhile, while also respecting students' opinions (autonomy support) (Pianta et al., 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). In this study, I developed "thick descriptions" of these relationships and interactions in an effort to understand better how engagement works in social studies classrooms. In the next section, I consider the implications of research on motivation and engagement for engaging students in learning social studies.

### **Implications of Research on Student Engagement for Social Studies Learning**

While many researchers have studied student engagement in math, reading and science, studies of students' emotional, cognitive and behavioral engagement in social studies are rare, and the field of social studies consistently ranks behind other subjects in student interest and perceptions of importance. Most students in the United States, at all grade levels, find social studies to be one of the least interesting, most irrelevant subjects in the school curriculum (Schug, et al., 1984; Shaughnessy & Haladyna, 1985; VanSickle, 1990; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). One of the potential reasons for students' negative attitudes toward social studies is that social studies tasks tend to call for memorizing and reporting on specific information and content, "rather than asking students for higher-level thinking, interpretation, or problem solving" (King, et al., 2010, p. 53). Eccles (2005) notes that when students believe a task is interesting, important and useful, they will be more engaged in their learning. Negative perceptions are also likely the result of teachers having to speed through a laundry list of content standards at a necessarily superficial level (VanSledright & Limon, 2006). In addition, students tend to equate



uninteresting with unimportant; thus, students are not motivated to learn social studies content because they do not value the content.

In their research on the perceptions of elementary school students and teachers about social studies, Zhao and Hoge (2005) concluded that, “teachers failed to communicate to students why social studies knowledge and skills are valuable and why social studies is important to them” (p. 219). Most children said they did not like social studies because “it is boring and useless,” “it’s reading the textbook,” and “it doesn’t apply” (p. 218). Negative attitudes about social studies are not confined to young students. Perrotta and Bohan (2013) found that “hating history” exists at the university levels as well. The value that students place on subject matter tasks and activities is integral to maintaining their interest, internalizing their sources of motivation and connecting the content with their self-identity (Brophy, 2010). “Without perceived linkages and a sense of potential utility, they have little motivation to invest the time and effort required to learn the knowledge and skills social studies teachers can teach them” (VanSickle, 1990, p. 23).

Theory and research on motivation and engagement, including self-determination theory, speak directly to these motivational challenges of engaging students in learning social studies. While students need to feel confident that they can achieve success (competence) and be comfortable enough with their teachers and peers to take risks and contribute to classroom discussions (relatedness), they also need to be interested in what is being taught and understand why the learning is important. In other words, when students ask the autonomy-related question: “Do I want to do this, and why?” they are demonstrating their psychological need to have control over their own learning. Autonomy-supportive teachers address this question by nurturing students’ interest in social studies and by helping their students come to understand why the

discipline, lesson, or task is important, meaningful, and worth their time and effort (Reeve, 2012).

Given the situational conditions that create supportive social contexts and optimize students' expectations that they can succeed, what features of the learning domain or activities might help foster students' autonomy in learning social studies? Thus far, this chapter has addressed the social contexts that engage students in learning rather than the specific domain or activities involved in the learning. In the final section of this chapter, I examine the literature on how social studies teachers may foster students' interest in and value for learning social studies.

### **Inducing Student Interest in Learning Social Studies**

Interest theorists suggest both emotional and cognitive relationships between students and particular learning domains or activities (Ainley, 2012). "At its simplest level, interest is a core psychological process energizing and directing students' interaction with specific classroom activities" (Ainley, 2012, p. 286). Hidi and Baird (1986) refer to this specific type of engagement as situational interest. *Situational interest*, sometimes referred to as the "hook," is an emotional state triggered by specific features of a task or activity (e.g. the novelty of a guest speaker, a chance to simulate a court drama, a controversial discussion, a movie). *Individual interest*, in contrast, is a more complex level of interest. A student with individual interest in World War II might spend hours reading books and watching movies on the topic. With this type of interest, it is not the activity that triggers the students' engagement. Rather, it is the students' "stored knowledge" about and "positive value" for the content that makes him or her eager to re-engage in the content, even when faced with challenges (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000).

Unlike individual interest, situational interest can disappear quickly and it is not necessarily characterized by deep knowledge or value for the content (Renninger & Hidi, 2002). Situational interest can play a key role in learning, especially when students do not have pre-existing individual interests in academic activities, content areas or topics. Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000) suggest, “Focusing on the potential for situational interest inherent in the material and mode of presentation may help teachers promote learning for all students, regardless of their idiosyncratic interests” (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000, p. 157).

Bergin’s (1999) review of the interest literature reveals a variety of situational factors that can draw students’ attention and elicit temporary interest. Providing students with optimal challenge, evoking curiosity and suspense, or infusing the element of fantasy into lessons were found to spark student interest in learning domains and activities, even when the students were not intrinsically interested. Additional sources of situational interest include instructional strategies such as hands-on activities, inducing cognitive dissonance (recognition of discrepancy between what we think is true and what the situation implies), novelty, games, humor and oral or written presentations (Bergin, 1999).

In his survey of eighth-grade U.S. history teachers, Hootstein (1995) identified the strategies teachers use to increase student interest. Simulations, an example of a fantasy element, topped the list for teachers. Students surveyed in the same study agreed that role-playing characters in simulations was the single best strategy that their teachers used to interest them in the content. Teachers mentioned that they used strategies such as simulations, games and hands-on activities to meet the students’ needs for being physically active, and strategies such as cooperative learning and group projects to meet their needs for affiliation.

Hypothesizing that online simulations would arouse interest in middle school social studies content and in the subject matter in general, Gehlbach et al. (2008) found that students became more interested in social studies as a result of participating in the online simulation. However, the researchers concluded that this increase in students' interest was not due to interest in or value of the specific content, but rather due to the opportunity to participate in social perspective taking.

Russell and Waters (2010) found that middle school students enjoyed a variety of instructional strategies including cooperative learning activities (79%), technology (Internet, film, video, etc.) and active learning (66%). What stands out in this survey, however, is that topping the list of answers to "How do you like to learn social studies?" was "Study guides, reviews, and review games to help prepare for exams and tests" (p. 10). Perhaps this finding reveals that, due to the current focus on high stakes testing, these students were more interested in learning when they felt they were developing learning strategies for processing information. In this sense, supporting students' competence and self-efficacy may also serve to increase student interest in learning the content.

Savich's (2009) action research project investigated strategies to improve engagement in a high school history classroom. He compared lecture-based classroom instruction with inquiry-based instruction (role-playing, simulations, re-enactments, multiple text analysis and document analysis) with respect to students' motivation, achievement and historical understanding. Savich (2009) found that when teachers emphasized and integrated inquiry-teaching methods to generate critical thinking skills, students' interest, engagement, historical understanding and achievement on summative assessments were greater than in more traditional classrooms.

While motivation theories support “best practices” for engaging students in learning, Willis (2002) argues that conventional motivation research has not sufficiently addressed issues of ethnic and cultural differences in motivation for learning or the cultural variations in meeting students’ psychological needs. She suggests that teachers integrate *culturally relevant pedagogy* (Ladson-Billings, 2006) into their classrooms. Culturally relevant pedagogy “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 382). Thus, any discussion of engaging students in social studies content must consider issues of race, class, gender and power. The nature of the social studies content, and the overarching purpose of “developing effective citizens,” demands an inclusive approach to teaching and learning social studies.

Based on evidence from these research studies, teachers can use several strategies to induce situational interest in social studies. However, Hidi and Baird (1986) draw an important distinction between factors that can trigger situational interest and those that are able to maintain interest over time. While games, simulations, role-plays, or puzzles may spark an interest in a social studies topic, the key to maintaining interest “lies in finding ways to empower students by helping them find meaning or personal relevance” (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). While situational interest provides the initial spark to gain the learner’s attention, the child’s attachment of “value” and “importance” to the content or the lesson maintains that interest. As Dewey (1913) argues, “It is not enough to catch attention; it must be held. It does not suffice to arouse energy; the course that energy takes, the results that it effects are the important matters” (p. 91). How might social studies teachers encourage students to appreciate the value of social studies learning?

## **Developing Students' Value for and Appreciation of Social Studies Learning**

The implications of theory and research on self-determination theory for social studies curriculum and instruction are based on the premise that the value that students place on subject matter tasks and activities is integral to maintaining their interest, internalizing their sources of motivation and connecting the content with their self-identity (Brophy, 2010). However, Brophy (1999) notes that current theories and research on motivation are not sufficient for explaining how students may come to value learning domains or activities, or how teachers might stimulate the development of such value. Some researchers, however, do shed some light on how teachers may focus students' attention on the value of social studies learning.

For example, Newmann (1992) theorized that student engagement is enhanced when classroom tasks are: 1) authentic; 2) provide opportunities for students to assume ownership of their conception, execution and evaluation; 3) provide opportunities for collaboration; 4) permit diverse forms of talents; and 5) provide opportunities for fun. Based on these criteria, Newmann and his colleagues (1992) developed a model for teaching for student engagement in the classroom. The Authentic Intellectual Work (AIW) model of engagement (Newmann, et al., 1996) draws on adult experiences in the work world to establish processes for learning in the classroom. In the real world, Newmann (1996) argues, people must build upon and apply their prior knowledge. Rather than reproduce what teachers transmit through lecture for the purpose of doing well on a test, he contends that students should construct knowledge through those activities that “represent the thoughtful application or expression of knowledge found in the activities of adults in the field” (Newmann, et al., 1996, p. 286). Thus, according to Newmann and his associates, “Construction of knowledge through disciplined inquiry to produce discourse, products or performance that have value beyond success in school can be used as the standard of

intellectual quality for assessing the authenticity of student performance” (Newmann, et al., 1996, p. 287).

Researchers indicate that students who are exposed to authentic intellectual challenges are more engaged in their schoolwork than students exposed to more conventional schoolwork (King, et al., 2010). When students are encouraged to *construct* knowledge rather than *reproduce* what the teacher has taught, to dig *deeply* into topics rather than skim the *surface*, and to engage in work that has significance and meaning *beyond the four walls of the classroom*, they are more willing to expend the effort that learning requires. “Increased opportunities for student engagement offered through authentic intellectual work lead to more effort, which pays off in increased student achievement on both basic skills and more complex intellectual challenges” (King, et al., 2010, p. 62). Marks (2000) tested the impact of authentic intellectual work and social support on engagement in schools. She found that perceiving class work to be authentic and experiencing forms of social support “contributes strongly to the engagement of all students” (p. 173).

While the AIW engagement model draws on the experiences of adults in the “real world” for sources of authenticity, Dewey (1902) offers an alternative perspective. He describes the relationship between the student and the subject matter as both the “logical” and the “psychological” aspects of experience – “the former standing for the subject-matter itself, the latter for it in relation to the child” (Dewey, 1902, p. 114). Dewey argues that teachers “psychologize” subject matter in order to transform the “logical” material and develop it in ways that students may approach it. When the content is left in its adult, logical form, Dewey notes that adults must use a “trick of method to arouse interest...to make it interesting...to get the child

to swallow and digest the unpalatable morsel while he is enjoying tasting something quite different” (Dewey, 1902, p. 122).

In the subject area of history education, Dewey suggests that young people may “become acquainted” with the past in such a way that the “acquaintance” helps the child appreciate the “living present” (Dewey, 1938, p. 23). Theorizing how to best “acquaint” young people with the past, Dewey opposes the notion that content should be presented to children as fixed, and that the accumulation of knowledge is an end in itself (Dewey, 1916). Instead, Dewey suggests that historical content should be presented to students as “immediate problems that also happened to have historical significance” (Fallace, 2010, p. 4).

To address the motivational challenges posed by students who find social studies uninteresting, unimportant and irrelevant to their lives, social studies educators may “psychologize” their lessons around the relevance and appreciation of the content, not just as a way to make learning fun (Brophy, 2010). Social studies curriculum and instruction can be built around what Nisan and Shalif (2006) refer to as a “sense of the worthy” so that students will value what they are learning.

Teaching students to appreciate the worth or relevance of social studies content can be difficult because relevance is subjective. What one person thinks is relevant about social studies learning, another person may think is boring and meaningless. Students perceive that content and learning activities are relevant if they are related to their personal needs (e.g. needs for autonomy, relatedness and competency) or their personal goals (e.g. to get into college, get a good job, out perform classmates) (Keller, 1987). Despite the subjectivity of relevance, Frymier and Shulman (1995) suggest several strategies for teaching for relevancy. Strategies include using examples to make the content relevant to students, linking content to other areas of



content, and asking students to apply content to their own interests. Frymier and Shulman (1995) found that when teachers used these strategies more frequently, their students reported having greater engagement in learning. Additionally, they found that students who reported that their teachers used more relevance strategies valued the content more.

Another approach to helping students appreciate the value of the content is to have the students themselves determine why or how the content is relevant. Frymier (2002) suggests that teachers present the content and then ask students why it is important to know this or how this information could be used. This autonomy-supportive strategy encourages students to attach their own importance to the learning and to figure out for themselves how the content relates to their own needs, goals and interests.

In recent studies, investigators examined whether such value interventions influence interest and performance on a task, and whether value interventions have different effects on student engagement and achievement depending on individuals' performance expectations (Hulleman & Harackiewicz, 2009). In the randomly assigned test group (N=136), students in high school science class generated brief essays describing how the material studied in their science class that week could be applied in their lives, while the control group (N=126) wrote a summary of the material they were studying. This value-based intervention led to a .80 grade point (out of 4.0) increase at the end of the school year for students who had low expectations for success in the course (no effects were found among the students with high expectations for the class). However, when the teachers explicitly told the students why the schoolwork was important rather than generate their own responses, the intervention had a negative effect on students with a low expectation for success. Researchers concluded that by telling students with low expectations for success that their schoolwork was highly important, they were reminded

that they might not be able to accomplish those important goals, which in turn shut down their motivation to learn (Hulleman & Harackiewicz, 2009).

Hulleman et al. (2010) concede that the effects of the relevance intervention could have occurred because discovering the connections between the content and their lives could have resulted in deeper processing of the material, which could have led the students to reorganize the material for easier recall and better encoding into memory. However, consistent findings by these researchers demonstrate that perceptions of task value play an important role in the development of students' interest, and they are also associated with academic performance, especially among students with low expectations for achievement.

Brophy (2010) summarizes many of these ideas in his definition of students' *motivation to learn* as "a student's tendency to find learning activities meaningful and worthwhile and to try to get the intended benefits from them" (p. 208). The primary objective of teachers' motivational efforts, suggests Brophy (2010), should not be to control student behavior or to make learning fun for students, but instead to motivate students to want to learn the knowledge and skills taught in the curriculum. In contrast to inducing situational interest, the goal of which is to evoke an emotional response to an activity, motivating students to learn is primarily a cognitive activity that requires students to make sense and meaning out of what they are learning.

Bruner (1977) echoed this sentiment several years earlier, "The best way to create interest in a subject is to render it worth knowing, which means to make the knowledge gained usable in one's thinking beyond the situation in which the learning has occurred" (p. 31). Students who believe that learning is interesting, important and useful, "will engage in more metacognitive activity, more cognitive strategy use, and more effective effort management" (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990, p. 34). Thus, identifying content and instructional strategies that help students

find social studies meaningful and worthwhile should be central to developing social studies curriculum and instruction.

Brophy (2010) notes that most school experiences do not involve physical thrills, emotional reactions or multi-sensory overload. Rather, motivating students to learn means both stimulating them to see the value of what they are learning, and providing them with the necessary scaffolding to show them how to do it. By modeling, coaching and scaffolding appreciation of the relevance of the content, teachers may be able to help their students learn to appreciate it. However, while school curriculum has potential value and could be appreciated by students, teachers are often unable to articulate the value clearly enough to either represent it in their instruction or scaffold the students' appreciation. The potential value is there, "but we have lost sight of the reasons for including it" (Brophy, 2010, p.215)

The implication for engaging students in social studies is that students do not need to enjoy learning tasks in order to be motivated to learn from them. They do need, however, to perceive the learning tasks as meaningful and worthwhile. To develop these perceptions in students, Brophy (2010) suggests that teachers a) insure that the curriculum content and learning activities are, in fact, meaningful and worthwhile and, b) help students come to value what they are learning. Even if the value is obvious or the content appears to be worthy of learning, students may not perceive the relevance as such unless the teacher scaffolds their learning in ways that enable them to see and appreciate its worth.

The challenges of teaching for an appreciation of social studies content are not new. For more than a century, numerous social studies curriculum reform efforts have sought to engage students in the subject through meaningful, relevant and authentic learning experiences. In 1938, Dewey challenged history teachers to consider, "How shall the young become acquainted with

the past in such a way that the acquaintance is a potent agent in the appreciation of the living present (p. 38). Dewey's contemporary Harold Rugg developed his own social studies curriculum as a series of Social Science pamphlets, each of which was organized around real social problems of the time (Kliebard, 2004). The New Social Studies movement of the 1960s and the Newer Social Studies movement of the 1970s sought to make social studies relevant by engaging students in the authentic work of historians, politicians, economists, geographers and anthropologists. In their Public Issues Series, Oliver, Shaver and Newmann (1970) sought to engage students in social studies content by developing units around controversial public issues and encouraging teachers to facilitate learning through investigations and deliberations of these public issues (Bohan & Feinberg, 2008).

More recently, programs such as Brown University's *Choices for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* and Auburn University's *Persistent Issues in History* offer teaching strategies and simulation role-plays to engage students in examining ongoing issues from multiple perspectives. Early research suggests that these programs are effectively engaging secondary students in social studies learning (Hess, 2009; Saye & Brush, 2003). Additionally, teaching approaches such as historical thinking (Seixas & Morton, 2013; Wineburg, 2012), primary source analysis, and service learning (Wade, 2000), have shown promise in conveying to students the value of social studies. Parker (2008) contends that teaching with and for discussion, through Socratic seminars and deliberations, is essential for engaging students in *knowing* and *doing* democracy. Problem-based and project-based learning advocates continue to promote the need for relevance and authenticity in learning. However, despite all of these efforts to reform social studies curriculum in the name of importance and worthiness, the majority of U.S. students find the field irrelevant (Schug, et al., 1984; Shaughnessy & Haladyna, 1985; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012).

Finding ways to articulate the value of social studies content in ways that students can relate to it remains a challenge, as is evidenced by its rarity in today's social studies classrooms. Throughout this case study, I will observe classroom interactions, interview teachers, and analyze classroom documents and artifacts to examine the various ways that teachers try to develop their students' value for social studies content and skills. I will also look to student focus groups and reflections to explore students' responses to their teachers' efforts. Rather than rely on self-report surveys that ask teachers and students to respond to specific interventions, I will provide thick descriptions of classroom practices that facilitate (or hinder) students' interest in and value for social studies learning. Building on the research provided in this review, I hope to provide examples of how engagement in social studies works when it works – or explain what happens when it does not work.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

The questions are timeless: “How can I get my students engaged in learning? What is the best way to get my students to think critically about rather than just memorize content? Is it my job to make learning fun? What is the purpose of learning?” Although theory and research on motivation and engagement conducted over the past three decades may help educators address these critical, persistent and often exasperating questions, the contributors to the most recent *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* (2012) suggest that many issues surrounding the student engagement construct remain unclear.

Handbook authors suggest that there is still a need to know “how student engagement works and when it works to have an impact on student learning and developmental outcomes” (Christenson et al., 2012, p. 814-815). More research is needed on how social studies teachers

support their students' engagement in practice (Anderman et al., 2011). Teachers may turn to the research to learn more about what they should do to engage their students and why they should follow such recommendations, but there are few resources for teachers to help them with how to implement those recommendations. For example, educators may acknowledge that they should teach in autonomy-supportive ways. However, even after reading *The Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012), teachers might still wonder, "What does autonomy-supportive teaching look like in secondary social studies classrooms? How do I get my students interested in learning U.S. history? How can I provide the structure necessary for competency support while also providing flexibility and choices necessary for autonomy support?"

In addition to the limited literature that looks at engagement theory in practice, there are few studies that examine student engagement from the perspectives of students, specifically in social studies classrooms (Anderman et al., 2011; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). Perhaps this lack of attention to students' voices is because the majority of the research studies on motivation and engagement are quantitative in nature; these studies seek correlations or causalities between and among facilitators, indicators and outcomes of engagement. Although this type of research is critical for building support for policy or pedagogical changes, quantitative studies do not often provide opportunities for students to voice their needs and present their perspectives on how and why they engage – or disengage – in learning.

Yazzie-Mintz and McCormick (2012) note that educational leaders and policy makers often argue that student perception data is untrustworthy. Adults only seem to trust what students have to say when "the data come from a standardized test, a transcript, or another "verifiable" quantitative measure" (p. 758). Providing students with a format to describe their own

educational experiences – why they engage or disengage in learning – is “likely to have a greater impact on the graduation/dropout problem than any isolated policy or structure” (Yazzie-Mintz, & McCormick, 2012, p. 759).

### **Conclusion**

Learning and achieving in school requires students to demonstrate effort and persistence, to concentrate, to willingly use learning strategies, and to focus cognitively as they participate with academic work; in other words, learning and achieving in school requires student engagement. According to engagement researchers, student engagement in academic work is far more than time on task, working hard, raising hands during classroom discussions or completion of assignments. While such behaviors are observable markers or indicators of students’ behavioral engagement, researchers posit that emotional engagement (interest, enthusiasm, enjoyment) provides the spark that encourages students to engage cognitively with the work (self-regulate learning, demonstrate higher-order thinking, invest in doing the work), which eventually leads to the behaviors that result in positive learning outcomes and lifelong value for learning.

At the heart of this multidimensional construct of engagement are relationships; relationships between students and their teachers and peers, and relationships between students and the content and skills they are being asked to learn. Facilitating and nurturing these relationships is critical for engaging students in classroom learning. The Skinner-Pitzer (2012) dynamic model of motivational development provides a structure to explore how teachers may nurture and facilitate these relationships to bring about positive learning outcomes and continued student engagement in academic work. The research studies discussed throughout this chapter

confirm the educational implications of the Skinner-Pitzer (2012) dynamic model of motivational development, specifically with respect to contexts that can nurture students' psychological needs for autonomy, competency and relatedness.

When teachers focus on mastery learning, they nurture students' beliefs about their competency, or self-efficacy (Ames, 1990). Teachers who foster caring relationships and promote student involvement through classroom discussions and other types of social interactions nurture their students' sense of relatedness (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). And, teachers who provide students with choices and rationales for learning can shift their students' sources of motivation from externally controlled to internally controlled – which nurtures their need for autonomy. Self-determination theorists suggest that students do not have to be intrinsically motivated to engage in learning; activities that are extrinsically motivated can still be completed autonomously if the students feel that they can be successful, that they belong, and that they identify with the activities' value and relevance (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

The literature on how teachers may support (or thwart) the personal and social sources of their students' motivation reads like a list of best practices in teaching. Recommendations to provide students with warm and caring relationships, challenging activities with high expectations and clear feedback for learning, and rationales that explain to students why participating in the activity or learning the content is important are not novel or groundbreaking. However, the lack of engagement in schools today suggests there is a gap, even a chasm, between student engagement theory and practice (Christenson et al., 2012b). Teachers may envision putting engagement theories into practice in their classrooms; however, developing and implementing an authentic and challenging curriculum within a supportive and structured classroom climate may seem overwhelming to many teachers. In addition, the resulting path to



high test scores, upon which teacher evaluations may be based, may seem too uncertain. The literature offers little to teachers who seek models or examples of what teaching for student engagement looks like, and how real classroom teachers effectively engage their students in the discipline of social studies.

To that end, this qualitative case study used the Skinner-Pitzer (2012) dynamic model to examine how teachers in two secondary social studies classrooms support their students' needs for autonomy, competency and relatedness. The purpose of this research was to understand how young people interact with their teachers, their peers and the academic work provided to them, and how these interactions and relationships affect how young people engage in social studies learning. A greater awareness of these relationships will help social studies teachers develop curriculum and instruction that supports their students' engagement by attending to their needs for autonomy, competency and relatedness. Understanding how and why adolescents engage in (or disengage from) learning social studies is critical for achieving the discipline's lofty goal of enlightened political engagement (Parker, 2008). Thick descriptions of how students engage in social studies learning – emotionally, cognitively and behaviorally – and of the factors (personal and social) that facilitate their engagement, promise to add to the existing literature on student engagement. More importantly, perhaps, this research might motivate social studies teachers to autonomously engage in the worthwhile task of motivating their students to learn social studies.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive material practices that make the world visible.

These practices transform the world.

~Norman Denzin & Yvonna Lincoln, *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, (2005), p. 4

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand how student engagement functions in secondary school social studies classrooms. My goal was to deconstruct the phenomenon of adolescents' emotional, cognitive and behavioral engagement in learning social studies by examining students' relationships, interactions and experiences with teachers and academic work. I planned to develop thick descriptions of the meanings that teachers and their students ascribed to these engagement experiences to better understand "how student engagement works when it works" in its natural classroom setting. This research purpose called for a methodology that drew on various sources of evidence and allowed me to conduct in-depth, holistic explorations of how student engagement functions in its real world context.

A pedagogically oriented qualitative case study design emerged as a natural research design for this study. Qualitative case study design is an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its natural context using a variety of data sources (Yin, 2014). I used a case study design to extend an evolving line of inquiry that investigates how adolescents' emotional, cognitive and behavioral engagement in learning social studies might be more effectively promoted and supported.

Embedded within a qualitative case study are assumptions about what it means to know (epistemology) and how researchers may come to know what they claim to know (theoretical perspective). These assumptions, in turn, have implications for what data is collected, how that data is collected, how that data is interpreted and analyzed, and how the researcher presents the findings to readers. The purpose of this chapter is to address these assumptions and describe the research design and procedures used to conduct this case study. The following chapter details: (1) the rationale and theoretical assumptions underlying case study research design; (2) the criteria for selecting case study design and a description of case study; (3) the context of the study, including descriptions of the research site, the participants and the sampling procedures; (4) the procedures for how the researcher collected data; (5) the procedures for how the researcher analyzed the data; (6) the criteria by which the quality of this study may be evaluated; (7) the roles of the researcher and the individuals who participate in the research study, including researcher positionality; and (8) the limitations of this study.

### **Rationale and Assumptions for a Qualitative Research Design**

The focus of this naturalistic, inductive and holistic inquiry into the socially constructed nature of student engagement situates this study within a qualitative research paradigm. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe qualitative research as:

...a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world.

This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to

make sense of, or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p. 3).

Throughout this investigation of individual cases of student engagement in middle and high school social studies classrooms, I “interpreted” experiences of student engagement in their natural classroom contexts to “transform” the world of student engagement into a series of representations, and make adolescent engagement in learning social studies “visible.”

A qualitative research paradigm requires researchers to make certain assumptions about nature of reality, what can be known, and how knowledge about the world can be known. In this study, I examine the dynamic processes of student engagement in classrooms. Understanding the relationships and interactions that take place between students and classroom contexts is essential for understanding student engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). This inquiry focus, thus, necessitates an epistemology that embraces a “world that consists of experiences and makes no claims whatsoever about “*truth*” in the sense of correspondence with an ontological reality” (von Glasersfeld, 2008, p. 12).

Accordingly, a constructivist/interpretive research paradigm best informs this case study of student engagement. “The constructivist paradigm assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (the knower and respondent co-create understanding), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 24). A constructivist/interpretivist epistemology recognizes that knowledge is constructed and understanding is co-created.

Doolittle and Hicks (2003) promote four epistemological tenets upon which constructivism is based: 1) knowledge acquisition is not passive, but happens through an individual’s active processing; 2) cognition is an adaptive process through which an individual’s

knowledge becomes more viable given a particular goal; 3) cognition does not provide an accurate representation of an external reality, but rather it helps individuals organize and make sense of their experiences; and 4) the sources of knowing are found in biological/neurological construction and social, cultural and language-based interactions (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003; Garrison, 1998; Gergen, 1995; VonGlaserfeld, 1998).

Within the broad scope of constructivism, social constructivism provides the foundation for understanding and interpreting the social and individual experiences that take place through the process of learning (Gergen, 1995). Social constructivism also provides the “net” to examine the role of the interactions between individuals and their world and their understandings of those experiences. For social constructivism, truth is “not to be found inside the head of an individual person; it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 110).

How might researchers come to understand these socially constructed *truths*? More specifically, how may researchers come to understand student engagement in social studies classrooms? To address these questions, this research study draws on both facets of the constructivist/interpretivist research paradigm. Social constructivism grounds those research assumptions derived from an inquiry into student engagement by emphasizing learning through experiences. An interpretivist perspective “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). Through this constructivist/interpretivist lens, I was able to collaborate with teachers and students to construct shared meanings and new knowledge about how student engagement works in social studies classrooms.

Compatible with a constructivist/interpretivist approach to understanding how knowledge is created is the symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective on how individuals create meaning. Symbolic interactionism assumes that human experience is mediated by interpretation; objects, people, situations, and events do not possess their own meaning; rather meaning is conferred on them (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007). This research study is situated within a symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective because the researcher sought interpretations of how students and teachers experience student engagement. For example, teachers may consider particular social studies projects or simulations to be engaging yet students may interpret those same activities or simulations as boring or unimportant.

Symbolic interactionism derives from the teachings of George Herbert Mead, who conceived of “reality as dynamic, individuals as active knowers, meanings as linked to social action and perspectives, and knowledge as an instrumental force that enables people to solve problems and rearrange the world” (Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2001, p. 217). Symbolic interactionism is a term coined by Mead’s student, Herbert Blumer. This research paradigm has three basic assumptions: 1) Human beings act toward the world based on the meanings that objects have for them; 2) Those meanings arise out of social interactions that people have with others and society; and 3) Meanings are modified and acted upon by an interpretive process used by human subjects as social beings (Crotty, 1998, p. 72).

Symbolic interactionism maintains that individuals construct meaning through interactions with other people and within specific contexts. Thus, students engage or disengage in learning activities, not because the activities are inherently interesting (or boring), but because of how the students interact with and experience the learning activities. Since individuals construct different meanings, Crotty (1998) suggests that at the heart of symbolic interactionism,

is “the notion of being able to put ourselves in the place of others” (p. 8). This role taking is an interaction, but as Crotty (1998) notes:

It is *symbolic* interaction, for it is possible only because of the significant symbols – that is, language and other symbolic tools – that we humans share and through which we communicate. Only through dialogue can one become aware of the perceptions, feelings and attitudes of others and interpret their meanings and intent. (p. 75-76)

This notion of perspective taking and meaning-making through dialogue is integral to this research study. Through in-depth interviews with teachers, observations of classroom interactions, analysis of classroom talk and discourse patterns, student and teacher reflections, teacher planning materials and other sources of data, the research participants and I hoped to co-create the experiences and meanings of student engagement. A close collaboration between researchers and participants provided a vehicle for participants to tell their stories. Through these stories, the participants described their views of reality. This dialogue exchange allows researchers to understand the participants’ experiences and actions (Lather, 1992).

Situating this research study in a constructivist/interpretivist research paradigm allows me to examine the different ways that students construct their perceptions of autonomy, competence and relatedness in their social studies classroom, and how those perceptions shape their engagement in learning activities. The symbolic interactionist asks researchers to put themselves in the place of the researched, to ask: “What common set of symbols and understandings have emerged to give meaning to people’s interactions?” (M. Patton, 1990, p. 75). Symbolic interactionism has implications both for the interactions between the researcher and the participants, and the interactions between and among the students and their teachers in the classroom.

Methodologically, symbolic interactionism directs the investigator to take, to the best of her ability, the standpoint of those studied (Denzin, 1978). Through a qualitative case study design, I endeavored to take the standpoint of students and teachers to understand their experiences and perspectives on the phenomenon of student engagement in social studies learning. Although inherent tensions inevitably develop over which interpretations receive greater emphasis in the final report – the researcher’s interpretations (etic view) or the participants’ interpretations (emic view) – Stake (2005) notes that researchers should make an effort to “preserve multiple realities and the different, even contradictory, views of what is happening in the classroom” (p. 12).

### **Researcher Subjectivities**

Because qualitative research is subjective, qualitative researchers inevitably approach their studies with viewpoints and opinions and preconceived notions of how research findings should or could be. However, as Stake (2010) notes, researcher subjectivity is not a sign of the researcher’s failure or something to be eliminated, “but as an essential element of understanding human activity” (p. 29). Researcher’s beliefs and opinions might bias or limit the research study, but they may also help energize the inquiry. By being explicit about their subjectivities, researchers can identify how their beliefs, experiences and dispositions may affect their research, which in turn can promote the study’s authenticity and credibility (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

Subjectivities can come from personal histories, cultural worldviews and professional experiences. My beliefs about the essential role of engagement in social studies teaching and learning are rooted in my own secondary school learning experiences. Throughout middle and high school, I was motivated to learn and excel, not from an intrinsic interest in the curriculum



content and types of instruction, but rather from an extrinsic goal of getting into an Ivy League school. For me, social studies was a series of disconnected subjects, boring textbooks, and a plethora of facts to be memorized and regurgitated. When classmates would bemoan, “Why do I need to learn all of this stuff?” teachers usually countered with the iconic words of George Santayana, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Those words meant nothing to me, nor did they seem to mean anything to my teachers. Doing well in school was not about making meaning or a sense of what I was learning; it was about demonstrating that I could perform well enough to earn the grades required by the most elite universities.

That perspective of social studies learning would all change in my junior year of college when one of my professors provided newly released transcripts of the Cuban Missile Crisis ExComm meetings. He challenged us to investigate the executive decision-making process during the crisis based on our readings of the transcripts and other “eyewitness” accounts of what happened. Did this mean that historical “facts” were up for interpretation? The professor challenged students to explore the implications of these findings on current political decision-making. Classroom deliberations over what, if any, access the public should have to that decision-making process during crises made that historical moment relevant. This approach to the teaching of history compelled me to major in history in college. I was so engaged in learning history that I put law school plans on hold to pursue a master’s degree in social studies education. I had hoped to become the teacher who would make social studies more interesting, more engaging and more real for my students.

I graduated from my master’s degree program eager to implement all I had learned about teaching and learning social studies. To that end, I developed a yearlong instructional simulation through which my students would “experience” U.S. history. However, after five years of

teaching, I came to realize that my high school teachers had not intended to bore us with disparate facts and meaningless dates and names. They were just doing the best they could with what they were asked to do – to teach U.S. History from exploration to present day. With just 180 teaching days, there seemed to be no time for in-depth investigations, controversial issues discussions or engaging simulations. Veteran teachers questioned my unorthodox teaching methods and even suggested that I was not being fair to the students. “If you don’t get through all of the content,” they warned me, “they may not do well on the test.”

My students did not do too well on the state test, but they performed no worse than their counterparts in the traditionally taught classes. Despite their disappointing test scores, I believed my students were engaged in learning social studies. They read newspapers on their own to find stories about the Constitutional Amendments they learned in our simulated “Law School.” They stayed after school to research historical shipping, lumber or manufacturing businesses so they could add their reports to our country’s “stock market.” They were not memorizing a list of a priori facts; they were making their own meaning about our nation’s history. It was hard work and time-consuming, and I consistently fell behind the pacing schedule set by our chairperson. Since my curriculum was not aligned with the “defined knowledge” paradigm supported at my school, eventually, I was asked to stop teaching the simulation in favor of the required curriculum. Unwilling to teach a prescribed curriculum, I left the classroom to develop programs and curriculum at CNN and Turner Broadcasting.

As a curriculum developer at the world’s leading news organization, I developed multimedia programs and materials to help social studies teachers connect their classroom content to current events and persistent issues. My programs and curriculum materials received the highest awards in the educational media industry, including an Emmy and a Peabody.

Nevertheless, after 12 years of developing award-winning curriculum units and programs, I had no idea if teachers were actually using these programs or if the materials engaged students in learning social studies. In speaking with students from around the country, I came to realize that educators who develop seemingly engaging instruction and learning activities do not necessarily engage their students in learning. The desire to understand how engagement works in social studies classrooms, how teachers facilitate engagement and how students experience engagement inspired me to pursue doctoral research on student engagement in social studies learning.

My experiences as a student, teacher, and curriculum developer and now as a parent have shaped and directed this research study. The desire to effect changes in social studies curriculum and instruction underlies this pursuit toward understanding student engagement. However, as more than a century of contentious debates over the purposes and strategies for teaching social studies illustrate, there are no “truths” or definitive answers for how to teach social studies. At times, my role as the researcher will be emic, an insider, working with individuals in education who share my progressive vision. Other times, I will be etic, the outsider, working to interpret the experiences of others. The roles that my subjectivities and positionalities played in this research study depended greatly on the positions of my research participants and of the audiences I hope to inform and perhaps influence.

I recognize that my worldview on student engagement in social studies learning has significant implications for my role as researcher, for my research findings and for how the education community receives my research findings. To deny these subjectivities, to suggest that they do not influence the study, however, is to deny the interpretive nature of qualitative research. Thus, it is incumbent on qualitative researchers to convey their positions, and to reconcile the potential for bias by exploring and analyzing findings through multiple perspectives

and by working closely with participants to insure that findings represent the participants' experiences rather than the researcher's subjectivities.

### **Case Study Design**

Yin (2014) defines case study research design in terms of its *scope* and its *features*. The scope of a case study consists of an empirical inquiry that (1) investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when (2) the boundaries between the phenomenon and context may not be evident (p. 16). In other words, “you would want to do case study research because you want to understand a real-world case and assume that such an understanding is likely to involve important contextual conditions pertinent to your case” (Yin, 2014, p. 16).

Case study design provides a natural fit for a study of student engagement. I conducted this in-depth empirical inquiry to understand better how adolescents engage in social studies learning (a contemporary phenomenon) within real-world contexts (social studies classrooms). I selected case study design because I could not consider student engagement in social studies without attention to classroom contexts, specifically the interactions that take place in those classroom settings. The boundaries between the phenomenon (student engagement) and the classroom contexts (e.g. learning activities, academic work, etc.) are not clear; however, the phenomenon and its contexts are inextricably linked (Connell & Wellborn, 1990; Deci & Ryan, 2002). Understanding how these relationships form is integral to understanding student engagement in learning (Ames, 1990; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

Yin (2014) notes that the features of case study designs (1) cope with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables than data points; (2) rely on

multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion; and (3) benefit from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis (p. 17). The first feature suggests that in-depth investigations studied within multiple contexts inevitably lead the researcher to discover a multitude of variables. Thus, the number of possible variables will likely outnumber the number of data points (each case is a data point). The second feature of case study design, multiple sources of evidence, relates directly to issues of data collection, and the third feature, the use of theoretical propositions, addresses specific approaches to data collection and analysis. These features are addressed later in this chapter. Case study design is a research method that facilitates exploration of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context.

Yin (2014) outlines five key components of case study research designs: (1) a case study's questions; (2) its propositions, if any; (3) its unit(s) of analysis; (4) the logic linking the data to the propositions; and (5) the criteria for interpreting the findings (p. 29). These components provide a "blueprint" for researchers as they consider what questions to study, what data are relevant, what data to collect, how to analyze the data and how to report research findings.

### **Case Study Research Questions**

A case study's research questions ask "how" or "why" about a contemporary phenomenon (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2014). The question guiding this dissertation research is: "How might social studies teachers in grades eight and eleven promote and sustain their students' engagement in learning activities?" Related to this inquiry is the question: "How

might social studies teachers develop classroom environments that support students' psychological needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness?"

## **Propositions**

The research questions guiding this study are grounded in what case study researchers refer to as *propositions* (theories, issues, models, etc.). Propositions direct the researcher's attention to specific topics, issues or aspects of "the case" that require further examination and analysis (M. Patton, 1990; Yin, 2014). Propositions may come from the literature, personal or professional experience, theories, and/or generalizations based on empirical data.

The conceptual framework for this study of student engagement draws on Skinner and Pitzer's (2012) dynamic model of motivational development. This model is grounded in self-determination theory and is organized around student engagement (and disaffection) with learning activities. According to this model, through interactions with classroom contexts, students construct self-system processes, which are organized around their needs for relatedness, competence and autonomy (Connell & Wellborn, 1990; Deci & Ryan, 2000). These self-system processes, in turn, provide a motivational basis for how students engage (emotionally, cognitively and behaviorally) in learning activities. This study investigates the interactions between students and classroom contexts in social studies to understand how social studies teachers engage their students in learning activities. (See Chapter One for a more extensive description of this conceptual model and the theories that support it.) *Table 1* outlines the propositions that will guide this study.

## Units of Analysis

The third component Yin (2014) describes in his case study blueprint is defining the unit of analysis – or the case itself. Patton (1990) defines a case as what it is that the researcher wants to discuss at the end of the study. For example, if the case is a classroom or an individual, then the researcher’s conclusions will address what he or she learned about in that classroom or by that individual. If the case is a program or a process, the researcher’s conclusions should address the program or the process.

Thomas (2011) notes that defining “the case” must take place within an analytical framework. For case study designs to constitute research, Thomas argues, there has to be a topic to be explained (the object or the analytical frame) and a topic potentially to offer explanation (the subject or “the case”). Based on this premise, Thomas (2011) suggests that the “*subject* [or case] will be selected because it is an interesting or unusual or revealing example through which the lineaments of the *object* can be refracted” (p. 514). In this relationship between subject and object, Thomas (2011) describes the object as the “analytical frame” within which the case (the subject) is viewed and which the case exemplifies. The analytical frame may or may not be defined prior to the study; however, it is the way that this “object” develops that is the heart of the case study. Thomas (2011) suggests that case study researchers should continually ask, “What is this a case of?” as evidence builds around potential explanations or “theories.” Thus, the development of theory in case study design is a means to an end – the ends being “thick descriptions” and theoretical explanations.

Applying Thomas’ (2011) logic for determining “the case,” I chose the *subject* (the case) – student engagement in social studies classrooms in grades eight and eleven – because they are “interesting, unusual and revealing example(s)” through which the student engagement construct

(the object) can be “refracted.” Theory and research on student engagement, by way of propositions, provides the “analytical frame” through which the case, adolescents’ engagement in social studies learning activities, may be viewed. I gathered evidence about how social studies classroom contexts shape students’ beliefs about their autonomy, competency and relatedness, which in turn shape student engagement in social studies learning activities. Broad theories about student engagement provide a means to an end – the ends in this case study being “thick descriptions” and “theoretical explanations” about how engagement “works when it works” in social studies learning in this particular context.

In this relationship between subject and object, Thomas (2011) describes the object as the “analytical frame” within which the case (the subject) is viewed and which the case exemplifies. The analytical frame may or may not be defined prior to the study; however, it is the way that this “object” develops that is the heart of the case study. Thomas (2011) suggests that case study researchers should continually ask, “What is this a case of?” as evidence builds around potential explanations or “theories.” Thus, the development of theory in case study design is a means to an end – the ends being “thick descriptions” and theoretical explanations.

Thomas (2011) suggests that there are three potential routes for selecting the subject, or the case to study. He refers to these routes as (1) a local knowledge case, (2) a key case, and (3) an outlier case. A local knowledge case is a case with which the researcher is familiar and has “intimate knowledge and ample opportunity” for informed and in-depth analysis. Thomas (2011) describes the local knowledge case as “eminently amenable to the ‘soak and poke’ (Fenno, 1986). The researcher is already “soaked” and is hopefully in a good position to “poke.” Researchers may also identify their subjects as either a “key case” or an “outlier” case. They select these types of cases because they can provide the researcher with “exemplary knowledge”



(p. 514). For this case study, I selected the subject, student engagement in social studies in grades eight and eleven, because of “local knowledge.” A more thorough explanation of how I selected the research site and the individual cases for the study is provided later in the chapter.

*Table 1. Case Study Propositions*

Potential Propositions	Sources
• There are interpersonal and personal contexts that can facilitate student engagement with learning activities in the classroom	Skinner & Pitzer, 2012
• Interpersonal contexts (e.g. teaching and instruction) that are positively associated with mastery learning and student competency include: meaningful, challenging and interesting tasks; shared authority and decision-making; recognition that promotes effort over social comparison; heterogeneous grouping, criterion-referenced and authentic evaluations; flexible use of time (TARGET)	Ames, 1990
• Social relationships establish a positive learning environment and respect for student perspectives (TARGETS)	Patrick, 2012
• Teachers who provide classroom contexts that promote warmth and caring (vs. rejection), optimal structure (vs. chaos), and autonomy support (vs. coercion) are more likely to engage students in learning activities	Skinner & Pitzer, 2012
• Personal contexts that influence student engagement include students’ beliefs about competency, autonomy and relatedness in the classroom	Connell & Wellborn, 1990
• When students feel autonomous, competent and related to others in the classroom, they are more likely to demonstrate intrinsic motivation	Deci & Ryan, 2000
• The primary motivational issues facing teachers are about helping students come to appreciate the value of learning activities	Brophy, 2010
• According to self-determination theory, individuals seek ways to fulfill their needs for autonomy, competency and relatedness through interactions with their environment	Deci & Ryan, 2002
• When students’ needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are satisfied in the classroom, they are more likely to seek out challenges, explore innate curiosities and pursue learning	Reeve, 2012
• Adolescents report that task-related disengagement and alienation in schools are directly tied to classroom experiences that are disconnected from their developmental needs and motivations	Pianta et al., 2012
• When students seek to <u>develop</u> competence in the classroom (or mastery learning goals), the quality of cognitive, emotional and behavioral engagement will be higher than students who seek to <u>demonstrate</u> competence (or performance learning goals).	Ames, 1990; Anderman & Patrick, 2012; Dweck, 2006
• Students who perceive that their teachers encourage interactions and classroom discussion report higher levels of emotional engagement and the use of self-regulatory strategies (a form of cognitive engagement)	Wang & Holcombe, 2010
• Interactions and relationships within classrooms mediate the influence of classroom contexts on motivation and engagement	Pianta et al., 2012
• In classrooms that are perceived as autonomy-supportive as opposed to classrooms perceived as controlling, students tend to show greater desire for mastery, higher perceived competency and greater intrinsic motivation	Deci & Ryan, 2002

## **Binding the Case**

Several authors, including Merriam (1998), Yin (2014) and Stake (2005), suggest placing boundaries on the case(s) to prevent the scope of the study from becoming too overwhelming and unmanageable. Binding a case may include restricting the time and place for the study, the time and activity, or the definition and context (Stake, 2005). To that end, I placed spatial, definitional, contextual and temporal boundaries on this study of student engagement in social studies. This study took place at one small, “progressive” private school over the course of five months. I worked with one teacher in each of two grades (eight and eleven). Each teacher selected one class for the research study. Within the classrooms, I limited my study to student engagement in learning activities that social studies or history teachers provide to their students. I examined how social studies teachers, by providing warmth (vs. rejection), optimal structure (vs. chaos) and autonomy support (vs. coercion), promoted or hindered students’ engagement with learning activities (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). In addition, I drew on Skinner & Pitzer’s (2012) descriptions of emotional, cognitive and behavioral engagement as indicators of student engagement in learning activities (*Figure 3*). By restricting the scope of the study to these definitions, contexts, timeframes, and locations, I controlled the study’s depth and breadth.

## **Type of Case Study**

Both Yin (2014) and Stake (2005) distinguish between single, holistic case studies and multiple-case studies. Researchers who identify their cases as critical, unusual, common, revelatory, or longitudinal cases may consider following a single, holistic case study (Yin, 2014). On the other hand, researchers may select multiple-case studies to explore similarities and differences within and between individual cases. Researchers who pursue multiple-case studies

seek to replicate findings across the cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008). According to Yin, (2014), researchers may select multiple cases so as to (a) predict similar results, or (b) predict contrasting results but for anticipatable reasons. Yin (2014) suggests that researchers who select two to three cases should focus on the similarity of results, or a literal replication. In a multiple case study, the case remains constant; the researcher is interested in the different contexts.

For this case study on student engagement in social studies, a multiple case study allowed me to examine the processes of student engagement in social studies in two distinct classroom contexts with two different age groups. Student engagement researchers argue that one of the reasons for student disengagement stems from a poor person-environment fit; that is, the classroom contexts do not meet the students' needs (Eccles & Wang, 2012). According to the Skinner-Pitzer (2012) model of dynamic motivational development, the processes by which teachers facilitate the conditions that can lead to emotional, cognitive and behavioral engagement (or disaffection) should be constant across age groups. However, the unique contexts that teachers create in their classrooms through their curriculum and instruction are consequential for student engagement (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Thus, student engagement is contextual. A multiple case study provides two unique classroom contexts for me to explore. I was interested, not only in the individual cases of classroom engagement, but also in the similarities and differences in the ways teachers in different grades facilitate student engagement.

### **Site Selection**

I chose to conduct the research study at The Gateway School (pseudonym), a small, preK – 12, private school in the southeastern United States. The primary criterion for selecting this school was its reputation. Administrators, educators, professors, teachers and parents describe the school's approach to learning as "progressive," "experiential," "hands-on," "real-world," and

“authentic.” Thus, LeCompte and Preissle (1993) might consider this sampling method as a reputational-case selection. In this sampling procedure, researchers choose a study population based on the recommendations of experts. The Gateway School is well recognized as one of a handful of progressive schools in the southeast (Kohn, 2013). The Gateway School’s public mission statement underscores its commitment to progressive ideals:

Gateway is the philosophically grounded, learner-focused independent school where students age 3 through grade 12 develop an abiding love for learning. Preparing students to live successfully as enlightened citizens in a changing world, our community embraces diversity, insists upon common decency, and fosters human dignity. Through innovation, enthusiasm, and high expectations, Gateway draws students joyfully into learning and cultivates the intrinsic curiosity and unrepeatable talents of each one. (Gateway website)

Gateway’s founder espoused John Dewey’s teaching and educational philosophies of experiential learning (Interview with Lisa Randall). He established this school in the late 1960s to provide children with a place where they could “learn to learn” and become “competent and self-motivated individuals” (Gateway website). The four “pillars” of the school – *creativity, mastery, individualism and fearlessness* – are carved in stone markers prominently over the bold columns that grace the front of the school.

Gateway’s reputation for mastery learning and for providing a nurturing and supportive learning environment convinced me to select Gateway for my youngest son. My older son chose to attend a far more traditional, conservative “college preparatory” school in the area. I selected Gateway for my youngest child because it suits his learning style; that is, he prefers experiential and project-based learning to more traditional forms of textbook, lecture-based learning. In addition, the concentration on mastery learning over performance goals (in the middle school,

students receive standards based progress reports each term rather than number or letter grades) helps my son focus on learning to learn as opposed to focusing only on grades. This shift in focus has eased his test anxieties and changed his thinking about the purposes of learning.

Thus, the selection of Gateway is also a local knowledge case; I selected this site because of my “intimate knowledge and ample opportunity” for informed and in-depth analysis (Thomas, 2011, p. 514). My insider (or emic) view of the school provides insight into how the teachers approach social studies curriculum and instruction. As a parent, I have first-hand experiences of Gateway’s educational philosophy and how teachers conceive of student engagement in social studies learning. Thus, I have many potentially conflicting roles in conducting this research. I am a researcher trying to set aside her subjectivities to conduct a study of student engagement; a parent who has a stake in the school and has built up trusted relationships with administrators and teachers; and a former social studies teacher who has prior experiences with student engagement (and disengagement). I addressed these potential conflicts by insuring quality, before and during data collection, throughout the analysis of the data, and in the reporting of the findings.

The purpose of this case study is to understand how teachers promote and sustain student engagement in social studies learning. Although The Gateway School is a *convenient* choice for the research site, I selected The Gateway School through purposeful sampling. Patton (1990) asserts that the logic of purposeful sampling lies in selecting “information-rich cases” for study in-depth. “Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the researcher, thus the term *purposeful* sampling” (M. Patton, 1990, p. 169). I have an insider’s perspective about specific instances of potentially engaging practices, and I am able to gain access to the school and its teachers. Thus, the Gateway

School provided me with a convenient and purposeful site through which I could explore the phenomenon of student engagement.

### **Participant Selection**

Although I purposefully selected The Gateway School for this study, the responsibility for selecting the individual teacher participants rested solely with the school's administrators and the middle and upper level social studies teachers. In my first meeting with Gateway's head master, I provided the following criteria for selecting teachers: the teachers should (1) teach secondary (grades 5 – 12) social studies in a yearlong course; and (2) be willing to participate in the study (approximate time commitments were provided). Participant selection at The Gateway School was somewhat limited due to the small school population. In Middle Learning (grades five through eight), there is only one social studies teacher for each grade. In Upper Learning (grades nine through twelve), the majority of the history courses are semester-long. World History and American History Studies are the only yearlong, non-AP courses offered in Upper Learning.

The Middle Learning principal selected the 8th grade social studies teacher because she was "willing and eager" to participate in the study. The seventh grade social studies teacher had other teaching commitments at the high school level and felt he might not have the time to commit to this study. In addition, at the time of the request, the researcher's son was in sixth grade, so the principal did not consult the sixth grade social studies teacher. The Upper Learning principal identified the American History Studies teacher as a teacher who would be both willing to participate and interested in student engagement.

The teachers who volunteered to participate in this study, Lisa Randall (pseudonym) and Emmett Blackwell (pseudonym), teach eighth and eleventh grade social studies respectively, and both teach American history. The selection of American history teachers was a secondary criterion for this study. Initially, I was more concerned with exploring engagement in the discipline of social studies than with studying any specific social studies content. However, the opportunity to focus on American history teaching and learning is fortuitous for several reasons. First, working with one of my professors, I was one of several authors of a research study that examined the extent to which high school American history teachers implemented Authentic Intellectual Work in their classrooms (Saye & SSIRC, 2013). Second, American history content provides another boundary for the study. Third, the fact that all students in the United States must study American history at some point in their educational careers contributes to the significance and relevance of this research for social studies educators.

In September 2014, before conducting research, I met with each teacher to discuss the study's purpose, scope, features and timeline. During this meeting, we had an open exchange of information during which the teachers and I discussed mutual goals for and details about the study. I provided the teachers with the agreed upon details of the study in a written informed consent form (Appendix). Once the teachers signed the informed consent forms, they selected one of their classes for the study. Lisa selected her first period class and Emmett selected his seventh period class. Later in September 2014, I presented the study to the students in both classes and handed out the assent forms and the parent consent forms (Appendix). I gave the students one week to return the signed forms. I left a large manila envelope in the classroom, and the students who returned their signed forms placed them in this envelope. I also sent an email home to all of the parents in eighth grade First Period Social Studies and eleventh grade Seventh

Period American History Studies to introduce the study. I attached both forms in the email as well. After one week, I collected the assent and consent forms, and I sent emails to the parents and the students thanking the students for joining the study. In total, six (6) eighth graders and six (6) eleventh graders joined the study. After teachers, students and parents signed the appropriate forms, I was able to begin data collection.

### **Data Collection**

Yin's (2014) fourth step in his blueprint for case study design – the logic linking the data to the propositions – addresses how the researcher considers what sources of evidence or data to collect and how she will collect the data. Case studies rely on many different sources of data to allow for in-depth inquiries and multiple perspectives on the studied phenomenon. No single source of information can be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective on the phenomenon (M. Patton, 1990). "Each data source is one piece of the "puzzle" with each piece contributing to the researcher's understanding of the whole phenomenon" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 554).

My choice of methods for gathering evidence in this case study was guided by a constructivist/interpretivist set of theoretical assumptions, a research purpose of understanding how engagement works in social studies classrooms, research questions that focused on how teachers facilitate student engagement in social studies, and propositions that provided direction for studying the case. I selected data collection methods to gather multiple emic (insider) perspectives on student engagement with learning activities. To gain a greater awareness and understanding of how student engagement functions in social studies classrooms and how teachers promote and sustain student engagement in learning activities, I collected evidence that



could provide “thick descriptions” of classroom experiences and interactions between students and classroom contexts.

For this case study of student engagement in social studies learning activities, I organized the data sources into six main categories: (1) weekly classroom observations; (2) in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers; (3) teacher reflections on researcher-written vignettes of select classroom observations; (4) focus groups with students; (5) an online student survey; and, (6) additional artifacts and documents. These documents and artifacts included photos of the physical classroom and school environment, student assessments and work samples, and other teacher materials such as review sheets, rubrics, and student reflection prompts.

### **Weekly Classroom Observations**

Classroom observations can provide a window into participants’ lived experiences and a lens through which to examine behavioral engagement in action. DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) define participant observation as “a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (p.1). In this case study, I played the role of *moderate participant* (Spradley, 1980); my role in the classroom was principally as an observer, not as a participant. Adler and Adler (1987) refer to this type of participation as “peripheral membership” in the groups being studied. Researchers are “part of the scene” but they keep themselves from being drawn completely into it. “They interact frequently and intensively enough to be recognized by members as insiders and to acquire firsthand information and insight” (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002, p. 24).

The purpose of these classroom observations was to examine how students and teachers

interacted, how students interacted with the learning activities, and how classroom structures appeared to support or hinder students' engagement. Observations also provided a foundation for further questioning and probing into the tacit, unobservable facets of student engagement. I conducted sixteen classroom observations in each classroom from September 2014 to March 2015. Class lengths varied from 40 minutes to 90 minutes as Gateway is on a modified block schedule. During most observations, when the teacher was talking, I sat in the corner of the room and typed up notes regarding student activities and interactions, classroom contexts such as notes on board, images on Promethean board, seating arrangements, teacher position in the room, etc. When the students were working in groups or working individually, I asked my student participants if I could observe and listen to their work. In some cases, I moved around the room, listening to the dialogue among the students in their groups. I audiotaped each observation so I could capture the dialogue during the lesson. I transcribed verbatim those observation recordings.

### **Interviews with Teachers**

While observations can provide data on students' behavioral engagement and on explicit classroom interactions, they do not readily provide the researcher with a lens to gather meanings, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that participants ascribe to actions. Interviews with teachers, both formal and informal, allowed me to explore how the teachers conceptualized students' emotional and cognitive engagement. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the teachers in October 2014. During the interviews, I referred to a prepared interview guide that included a number of open-ended questions. I provided the teachers with this list of questions a few days before the interview. After each question, I followed up with additional clarifying questions and probed for

further detail and description (Roulston, 2010). I used both phenomenological and ethnographical lines of questioning.

The purpose of phenomenological interviewing is to generate detailed and in-depth descriptions of human experiences, including the participants' feelings, perceptions and understandings. One of the first questions I asked the teachers was to provide a definition of student engagement in social studies learning activities. I then engaged in a dialogue with the interviewee, asking for his/her ideas about 'ideal' experiences as well as 'actual' experiences (Roulston, 2010).

For example, phenomenological questions included, "Can you tell me about a time when you thought that your students were really engaged in a topic or lesson? How did you know they were engaged?" Although phenomenological interviewing traditionally places the interviewer in a neutral, non-interpretive stance, Dinkins (2005) suggests that phenomenological interviews, what she refers to as "Socratic-Hermeneutic Inter-view," can engage the interviewer and interviewee (seen as the co-inquirer) in a dialogue during which they co-create knowledge about the phenomenon. Interpretation thus becomes part of the interview process itself.

While phenomenological interview questions elicit descriptions of the participant's "lived experiences" of student engagement, ethnographic interview questions explore the meanings that people have about actions and events in their cultural worlds. Student engagement in learning activities takes place within classroom contexts. These classroom contexts may be viewed as a culture – a system of beliefs, symbols, values, rituals, language and artifacts that united the players and the ways that the various individuals and groups interact (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Although this case study does not focus on classroom culture as "the case," the classroom culture has implications for how engagement functions and how interactions between students



best in social studies?” Follow up questions elicited answers regarding student perceptions of their autonomy, competence and relatedness in their social studies classroom. My second focus group with the 8<sup>th</sup> graders followed a very powerful guest speaker who spoke about issues related to race today. I abandoned my intended questions that addressed the students’ thinking and cognitive engagement and instead asked the students about their impressions of the guest speaker and what they have learned during the civil rights unit. While I was unable to delve into how the students perceived their opportunities for deep thought and their competence, I felt compelled to get their impressions about our guest speaker. I was glad I did as our conversation revealed a great deal about how teachers may engage students in controversial topics.

My second focus group with the 11<sup>th</sup> graders focused on the types of thinking they do in their American History Studies class and how thinking relates to their engagement. In most of my observations of Emmett’s class, I noted that he was using different prompts to encourage his students to think. I wanted to see if the students understood what he was asking them to do and found it cognitively engaging. To help me frame this focus group, I turned to a book called *Making Thinking Visible: How to Promote Engagement, Understanding and Independence for All Learners* by Ritchhart, Church and Morrison (2011). This book was required reading for all Gateway teachers during the summer, and the Head of School recommended that parents read it as well. First, I asked students: “When you tell someone you are thinking in social studies, what are you doing?” The students shared their answers and we grouped their answers by commonalities. Next, I presented the students with strips of paper, each featuring a description of a different type of thinking featured in the book (e.g. reasoning with evidence, making connections, considering different viewpoints and perspectives, uncovering complexity and going below the surface of things, etc.). I asked each student to select one type of thinking and

provide an example of how she used it in her American History Studies class. The resulting discussion helped to illustrate the roles that thinking play in the students' engagement in social studies.

In the third focus groups for both grades, I asked the students to brainstorm a list of words they would use to describe a “very engaging learning activity.” I posted these words on large white chart paper. I then presented the students with the different learning activities I observed in their classrooms, and I asked the students to evaluate the activities in terms of their levels of engagement. In evaluating the learning activities for engagement, the students referred to the words on the large chart paper. These focus groups were revealing as the students were very forthcoming as to what they find engaging about learning activities and how the activities I had observed met that criteria.

### **Online Survey of Student Engagement in Social Studies**

To insure that I had not overlooked anything important regarding the students' perceptions about their autonomy, competence and relatedness in their social studies classrooms, I created a brief online survey using Survey Monkey (Appendix) that included questions directly related to each of the three constructs. In early March, I emailed the students the URL for the survey, and I explained the purpose and logistics for the survey. Student submissions were completely anonymous; the only identifiable information that I collected was whether the student was in 8th or 11th grade. The survey questions were adapted from two existing survey instruments. The Center for Evaluation and Education Policy at the University of Indiana developed the first instrument called the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE). The second instrument is the Skinner Survey Assessment on Engagement vs. Disaffection with

Learning Student Report, which Dr. Ellen Skinner developed. I selected questions from each of these instruments to create a brief survey (See Appendix for Student Survey of Engagement in Social Studies). The survey included five questions, each with a list of options from which students could choose. For example, the first question was “How much does each of the following social studies classroom activities and assignments interest or engage you in learning?” I did not plan to use survey results to generalize the level of student engagement in social studies as the sample size is too small and I did not use random sampling. Instead, I used survey results to gain further insight into student engagement in social studies in these two classrooms, and to use it to elicit feedback from students and teachers on classroom engagement.

### **Teacher Reflections on Vignettes**

To delve deeper into how the teachers conceptualize engagement in their lessons, I asked the teachers to write a series of reflections throughout the study. I selected the topics for the reflections based on emerging themes and categories. In November 2014, for her first reflection, Lisa wrote about her perspectives on the school’s new emphasis on “4D Learning.” 4D Learning is the school’s strategic vision, and it stands for Deliberate, Daring, Discovery and Dynamic. These four words serve as the answer to the question, “What does learning look like at The Gateway School?” In October 2014, Gateway mailed a promotional brochure to parents entitled: *4D Learning: Delivering the Optimum Environment for Engaging Students*. I wanted Lisa to reflect on how this vision for teaching and learning at Gateway translated to her classroom.

Rather than gather Emmett’s understanding of 4D Learning, I wanted to gain a better understanding of the types of thinking he values and fosters in his classroom. Getting the students to think in different ways was emerging as a theme in my study, and I wanted to gather

Emmett's perspective on the role of thinking in engagement.

Approximately half way through my data collection, I discovered that, rather than collect written reflections from teachers on select topics, what I really wanted was to gather their reflections on the lessons I observed. Instead of handing the teachers the 10-15 page transcripts of those observations and ask them to reflect, I used my field notes and transcripts of the classroom dialogue to write short vignettes of my classroom observations. Vignettes are “composites that encapsulate what the researcher finds through the fieldwork” (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997, p. 70). Ely et al (1997) identifies three types of vignettes – snapshots, portraits and composites. Snapshots are accounts of what the researcher experiences during observations (Spalding & Phillips, 2007). Portraits look to interviews to represent participants' character and experience (Spalding & Phillips, 2007). Composites are an eclectic mix of different instances drawn from observations for conveying an ideal example of teaching, “amalgamating and reported as one fictional presentation – the vignette is contrived, culled from various examples of teaching (Spalding & Phillips, 2007).

My purpose for writing these vignettes was four-fold. First, I hoped to recreate my classroom observation experience so that my readers would vicariously feel like they had been in the room with me. Second, I wanted the vignettes to serve as exemplars of student engagement (or lack of engagement) – to help make student engagement visible for my readers. Third, I wanted my teacher participants to read them to confirm my depictions of their lessons. I gave the teachers the opportunity to delete, add to or edit the vignette text. Finally, I wanted to stimulate the teachers' reflection and analysis of the classroom events and to encourage them to share their perceptions of what worked or did not work – and why – to engage students during the lessons.



Both of my teacher participants agreed to read these vignettes and then meet with me to discuss them. I did not ask the teachers specifically to identify contexts that supported (or hindered) the students' perception of their autonomy, competence or relatedness. Rather, I asked the teachers to reflect on the lesson vignettes and share what they believed were signs of engagement or disengagement. I wanted to gather their perspectives on what was most effective or ineffective for engaging their students. After the teachers had time to read and reflect on the vignettes, we met to discuss their reflections. I recorded these conversations, and I transcribed them as "teacher reflections." This strategy proved to be very effective as the teachers were very forthcoming about what they thought worked or did not work, and they shared with me possible reasons why they believed their students were engaged or not. They also reflected on their own teaching practices and on their strengths and weaknesses in promoting and sustaining student engagement. These vignettes and the follow up recorded reflections provided another vehicle for the teachers to share with me their instructional and curricular decision-making processes and to evaluate how effective those decisions were for engaging students.

### **Documents and Artifacts**

Lastly, artifacts and documents, including photos of the physical classroom environment, teacher handouts, student assessments, and student work samples provided alternate sources of evidence of how engagement works when it works (or does not work) in these contexts. I used these documents to elicit meanings and interpretations of student engagement from teachers.

The use of multiple methods in qualitative research reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. I designed the interview questions, observations and field notes, student focus groups, online survey, teacher reflections and artifact

and document collection to investigate in-depth how engagement works when it works (or potentially does not work) in social studies classrooms.

### **Data Analysis**

Yin's (2014) last component in his case study design blueprint is the criteria for interpreting the findings or the data analysis strategies. Yin (2003) maintains that case study data analysis consists of "examining, categorizing, tabulating, testing...evidence to address the initial propositions of a study" (p. 109). Thus, the goal of case studies is to uncover patterns, determine meanings, construct conclusions and build theory" (E. Patton & Appelbaum, 2003, p. 67). To that end, I turned to qualitative content analysis to analyze my data for this multiple case study.

Qualitative content analysis (QCA) is a research method for describing the meaning of qualitative material through a systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh, 2005; Schreier, 2012). The goal of content analysis is "to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study" (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314). In the process of conducting qualitative content analysis, the researcher condenses raw data into categories or themes based on inference and interpretation. Researchers can accomplish this process inductively, allowing categories to emerge directly from the data, or deductively, using existing theory and research to guide the data analysis. Whether conducted inductively or deductively (or using a combination of both), QCA requires that researchers classify parts of the data as instances of the categories of a coding frame.

A coding frame is a way of structuring the research material. It consists of main categories that specify relevant aspects of the study and of subcategories within each main category that specify relevant meanings for those aspects of the research (Schreier, 2012). The

researcher's analysis focuses on select aspects of the material as directed by the research question, and, if conducted deductively, by the theory and research on the topic. QCA can be used to analyze any type of recorded communication such as interview and focus group transcripts, observation notes and transcripts, student work samples, written lesson plans; essentially anything that is written. By using QCA, I hoped to develop themes and categories that would make student engagement in social studies visible.

A juxtaposition of qualitative content analysis and case study research suggests that these two formats are highly compatible. First, case study research stresses the importance of real life context when investigating contemporary phenomenon (Yin, 2014); similarly, QCA emphasizes the role of context in understanding phenomena, in contrast to quantitative content analysis. Second, case study relies on multiple sources of evidence (e.g. interviews, observations, documents and work samples, etc.) (Yin, 2014) just as qualitative content analysis benefits from a comprehensive collection of multiple text data sources (Elo et al., 2014). In fact, open-ended or semi-structured interviews are central to both case study research and qualitative content analysis (Yin, 2014). QCA is “a rule-based, theory-guided method for analyzing interview transcripts, just the way it is required by the principles of case study research” (Kohlbacher, 2006, p. 21).

Perhaps the strongest link between case study research and qualitative content analysis is that they both seek to fuse the openness of the qualitative research paradigm with the structure of a theory-guided investigation. As Kohlbacher (2006) notes:

Qualitative content analysis takes a holistic and comprehensive approach towards analyzing data material and thus achieves to (almost) completely grasp and cover the complexity of the social situations examined and social data material derived from them. At the same time, qualitative content analysis uses a rule-based and methodologically

controlled approach in order to deal with the complexity and gradually reduce it....Therefore, qualitative content analysis perfectly fits the credo of case study research: helping to understand complex social phenomena. (p. 19-20)

Both case study and qualitative content analysis assist researchers as they compare the theory with the data in an iterative process. Thus, qualitative content analysis aligns well with the case study research blueprint.

### **Inductive and Deductive Analysis**

In the process of condensing raw data into categories or themes, researchers using QCA can use inductive reasoning, deductive reasoning or both (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Inductive reasoning requires that the researcher carefully examine the data and look for themes and categories to emerge. Grounded theory data analysis refers to this process as constant comparison. QCA researchers can also use deductive reasoning to develop their themes and categories. A deductive approach to data analysis begins with existing theories or prior research on the phenomenon under investigation. Unlike other data analysis methods such as ethnography or grounded theory, QCA allows existing theories to inform categories, especially in the early states of analysis (Schreier, 2012).

Schreier (2012) refers to inductive category generation as “data-driven” analysis and to deductive category generation as “concept-driven” analysis. In QCA, it is common that researchers use both data-driven and concept-driven analysis (Schreier, 2012). QCA researchers may initially turn to existing theory or research to develop their main themes or categories; this is the concept-driven part of the data analysis process. However, once the researcher begins collecting data, he or she may examine the material for what participants say and do with respect

to these main themes or categories. Using memos and constant comparison, researchers then create subcategories or subthemes that emerge from the data. This is the data-driven part of the data analysis (Schreier, 2012).

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) describe this mix of concept and data-driven content analysis as *directed content analysis*. Directed content analysis begins with existing theory or relevant research findings, especially in the initial phases of coding. During data analysis, however, the researchers immerse themselves in the data and allow themes or categories to emerge. Researchers who use directed qualitative content analysis often want to validate or extend a conceptual framework or theory (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009).

In pursuing the research question: “How might social studies educators promote and sustain student engagement in learning activities?” I have immersed myself in the literature on student engagement. It would be very difficult to divorce myself from all of the theory and research I have learned on the subject. Specifically, I turned to one theory of motivation and engagement, self-determination theory (SDT), as a theoretical framework to guide my inquiry of engagement. My goal in using self-determination theory was not to extend the theory, but rather, to use it as a framework to guide my inquiry into student engagement in social studies classrooms. Although I provided a summary of self-determination theory in Chapter One, its role in directing my methodology bears repeating here.

Self-determination theory holds that an attitude of determination is the foundation for motivated behavior. Authors Deci and Ryan (2000) distinguish between intrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable (i.e. the activity itself is enjoyable), and extrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because of an external outcome (e.g. doing the activity to get a good grade, please your parents, etc.). “Over

three decades of research has shown that the quality of experience and performance can be very different when one is behaving for intrinsic versus extrinsic reasons” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 55). While Ryan and Deci (2000) have demonstrated that intrinsic motivation results in high quality learning and creativity, they have also shown that extrinsic motivation can result in high quality learning, as long as the students recognize the value or the utility of the task. “Because many of the tasks that educators want their students to perform are not inherently interesting or enjoyable, knowing how to promote more active and volitional (versus passive and controlling) forms of extrinsic motivation becomes an essential strategy for successful teaching” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 55). Thus, self-determination theory provides a framework for how teachers might lead students to develop a sense of determination about doing the work necessary to learn because the students have internalized or “bought into” the reasons for doing so.

Self-determination theory assumes that people seek opportunities to gain mastery over challenges and that having new experiences is essential for developing a sense of self. Recognizing that people are often motivated by external rewards such as money, grades, prizes or praise, self-determination theory examines the internal sources of motivation such as a person’s need to gain knowledge or independence. In order to achieve such growth, people need to have basic needs satisfied. Basic needs theory, a sub-theory of self-determination theory, identifies three psychological needs: *autonomy* (the need to feel in control of our behaviors and goals), *competence* (the need to gain mastery over tasks and learn different skills) and *relatedness* (the need to experience a sense of belonging and attachment to other people). These basic needs are the source of students’ “inherent and proactive intrinsically motivated tendency to seek out novelty, pursue optimal challenge, exercise and extend their capabilities, explore and learn” (Reeve, 2012). Basic needs theory explains why students sometimes show active

engagement in learning activities and other times demonstrate disaffection or even antagonistic involvement (Ryan and Deci, 2000). When classroom conditions support students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, students are more likely to be engaged in learning. However, when classroom conditions do not support these basic needs, students' engagement is more likely to dissipate.

Thus, how students perceive their autonomy, competence and relatedness in individual classrooms is central to whether or not they engage in learning activities (Reeve, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000). A large body of empirical evidence based on self-determination theory suggests that nurturing students' intrinsic motivation and autonomous forms of extrinsic motivation supports student engagement and optimal learning. Niemiec and Ryan (2009) argue:

Evidence suggests that teachers' support of students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness facilitates students' autonomous self-regulation for learning, academic performance, and well-being. Accordingly, SDT has strong implications for both classroom practice and educational reform policies. (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009)

Thus, self-determination theory was a natural fit to guide my research on student engagement in learning activities in social studies classrooms.

While I used self-determination theory and its themes of autonomy, competence and relatedness initially to focus my research, I turned to my data to understand how teachers supported these needs in their classrooms, and how students perceived these classroom contexts as engaging or not. This was the data-driven part of my analysis. Therefore, I was able to use a mix of both deductive and inductive analysis procedures to help me describe the phenomenon of student engagement in social studies learning activities.

Qualitative data analysis requires researchers to make inferences and to interpret data. The act of interpretation and meaning making is inherently subjective. Hseih and Shannon (2005) caution that a directed approach to qualitative content analysis can lead researchers to approach their data with an “informed, but nonetheless, strong bias” (p. 1283). By using theory to guide the research, researchers might be more likely to find evidence that supports a theory rather than evidence that contradicts or alters it. Interview questions guided by the theory might lead participants to answer in such a way as to please the researcher or support the theory. In addition, Hseih and Shannon (2005) suggest that an overemphasis on the theory can unintentionally blind researchers to “contextual aspects of the phenomenon” (p. 1283). Researchers who use QCA recognize the importance of moving beyond individual understandings to stand the test of consistency. Consistency can mean that other researchers interpret the same passage of text in the same way (inter-coder reliability), or that the researcher, if working alone, interprets the same passage in the same way at two different points in time (Schreier, 2012). Increasing consistency can lead to increased trustworthiness. Thus, to address the potential for bias or the possibility that theory might cloud the researcher’s ability to recognize unforeseen meaning in the data, qualitative content analysis requires researchers to follow specific steps (Schreier, 2012).

### **The Qualitative Content Analysis Process**

Qualitative content analysis involves a sequence of steps that researchers must follow. These steps include: (1) preparing the data; (2) defining the unit of analysis; (3) developing categories and a coding scheme; (4) testing your coding scheme on a sample of text; (5) coding all the text; (6) assessing your coding consistency; (7) drawing conclusions from the coded data;



and (8) reporting your methods and findings. What follows below is a description of how I analyzed my data using qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012).

### **Preparing the Data**

Qualitative content analysis can be used to analyze all types of data, including interviews, focus groups, observations, teaching materials, and student work samples. However, before the researcher can analyze the content, he or she must transform all data into written text. For this study, I transcribed verbatim all interviews with the teachers, all focus groups with the students, teacher reflections, and approximately eight of the 16 observations, including all dialogue and field notes.

To assist with data management and analysis, I used a web application called Dedoose. Dedoose allows qualitative or mixed methods researchers to upload and name transcripts, highlight excerpts and code them with user-defined terms, write memos and link them to data, and export data to Microsoft Word. Codes are defined, placed in a hierarchy and color coded for ease of identification. Researchers can assign descriptors to their data; I described my data by grade level, resource type and lens (i.e. researcher, teacher, student, parent). During analysis, excerpts may be organized and analyzed by any of these descriptors. Dedoose enables researchers to use the data to observe patterns and emerging concepts, to memo about these emerging concepts and to compare data through multiple formats and lenses. Throughout this section, I provide screen grabs of each of these components to demonstrate the data analysis process within Dedoose.

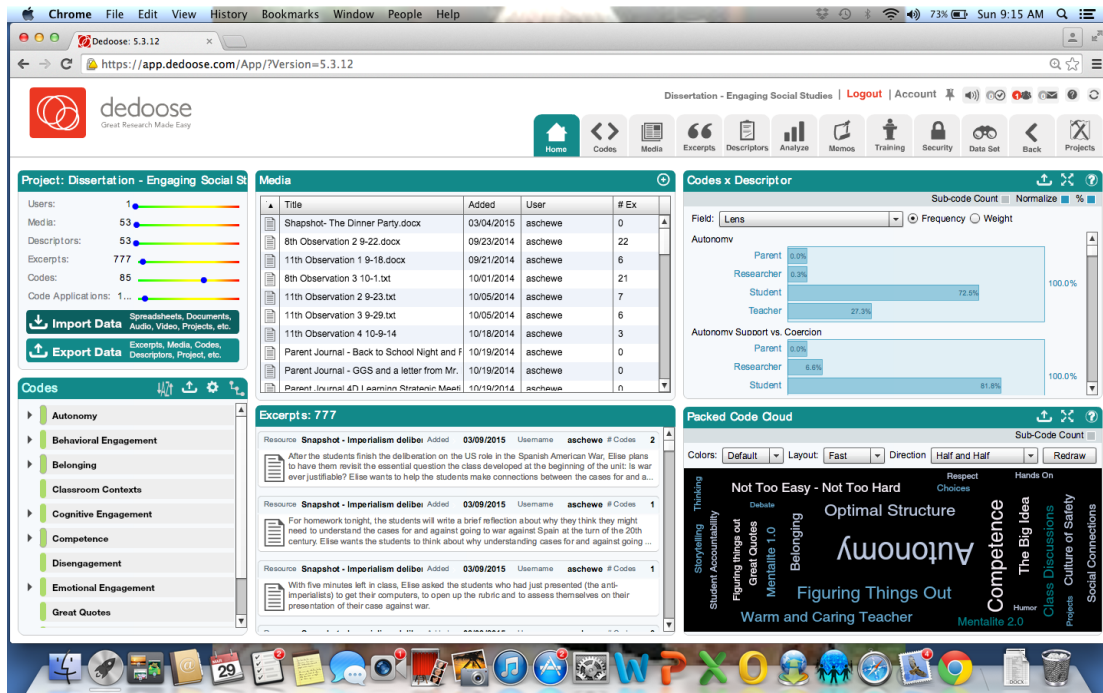


Figure 8. Screenshot of Dedoose main page.

## Defining the Unit of Analysis and Units of Coding

Deciding on what content analyze and in what detail is an important factor in qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngas, 2007). The *unit of analysis* is the basic unit of text to be coded during qualitative content analysis (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009). Schreier (2012) differentiates *units of analysis* from *units of coding*. Units of analysis are identical to the “case.” For example, Schreier (2012) suggests that when conducting interviews, each interview serves as the unit of analysis. With units of coding, researchers segment, or divide, the content into smaller units of text so that each unit fits into one category or theme. A unit of coding is that part of the unit of analysis that researchers can meaningfully interpret with respect to the categories. “They are those units that you assign to a category in your coding frame” (p. 131). Units of coding, or excerpts, may be a single word, a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph or an entire document (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009). Segmenting material into units of analysis and units of coding is

important in qualitative content analysis because the process forces researchers to take all relevant information into consideration and to be explicit about their objectives (Schreier, 2012).

Elo and Kyngas (2007) point to Graneheim and Lundman's (2004) suggestion that researchers use units that are "large enough to be considered as a whole and small enough to be kept in mind as a context for meaning unit during the analysis process" (p. 109). For this study, I selected transcripts of entire interviews, focus groups, reflections, samples of student work, and observational protocols as my units of analysis. I chose a thematic approach to select my units of coding. Initially, I selected coding units that related to the themes of autonomy, competence and relatedness. Once I overlaid these themes onto the data, I found that many sub-themes soon emerged. In some cases, themes were expressed as a word, such as "connections," or "caring," but in other cases the themes were expressed in a phrase, such as "real discussion" or "figure it out." Often, these themes emerged in a sentence, a paragraph or even in several paragraphs. Thus, I assigned my codes to different sizes of text. For example, Figure 9 illustrates text that I coded for "real discussions" and "not real discussions."

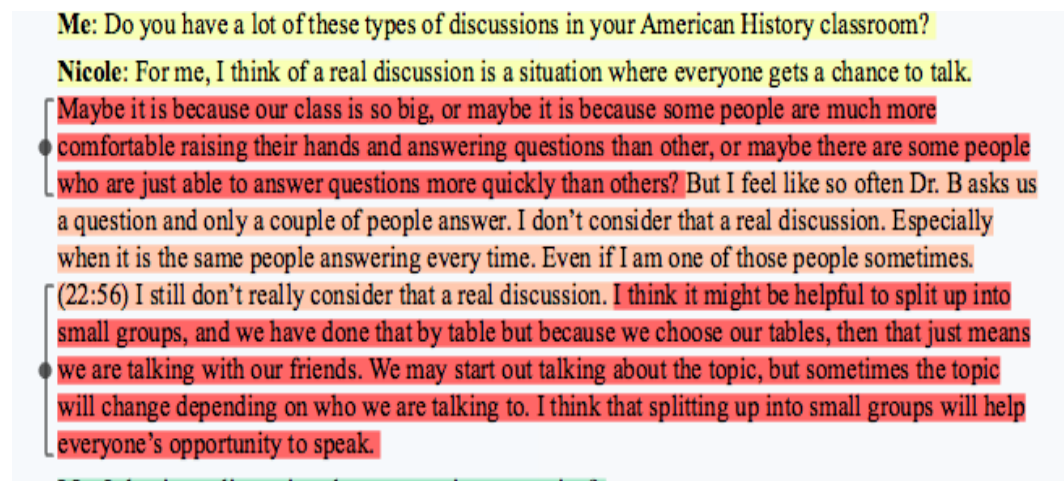


Figure 9. Transcript text coded for "real discussions."

Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) suggest that researchers may assign codes to chunks of text of any size, as long as the chunk represents a theme or issue relevant to the research question.

## **Developing Categories and a Coding Scheme**

Once researchers have established how they will segment their data for interpretation, they develop categories or themes and develop a coding scheme. Before collecting data, I had determined that my main codes would draw on self-determination theory and its sub-theory, basic needs theory. While the authors of self-determination theory and basic needs theory clearly define the categories of autonomy, competence and relatedness in their literature, these are complex terms, and they are likely to be interpreted differently from one researcher to the next. To insure that coding is consistent throughout the analysis process, qualitative content analysis researchers develop coding manuals, which are essentially charts that consist of category names, operational definitions of the codes with rules for assigning those codes, and key examples of those codes within the data material (Mayring, 2000). The purpose of writing explicit code definitions is so that the researcher is able to consistently recognize instances of the concepts in the data. To that end, I developed a coding manual, which initially just included the categories of autonomy, competence and relatedness, but eventually included all of my codes. To help me define the terms autonomy, competence and relatedness, I turned to foundational articles written by self-determination theory researchers Deci and Ryan (2000, 2002).

Once I had transcribed several of the initial interviews and focus groups, I began coding the text with these predetermined codes. In Dedoose, I read and reread transcripts of interviews and focus groups, and I identified excerpts that illustrated instances of autonomy, competency and relatedness. For example, Figure 10 illustrates an excerpt that I coded for “competence” based on this definition of competence from my coding manual:

Competence refers to the ability to be successful in one’s endeavors. Students believe they have control over their ability to learn and that they can be effective in mastering

challenges (Dweck, 2006). Students feel that they can be successful and see themselves as capable rather than incompetent.

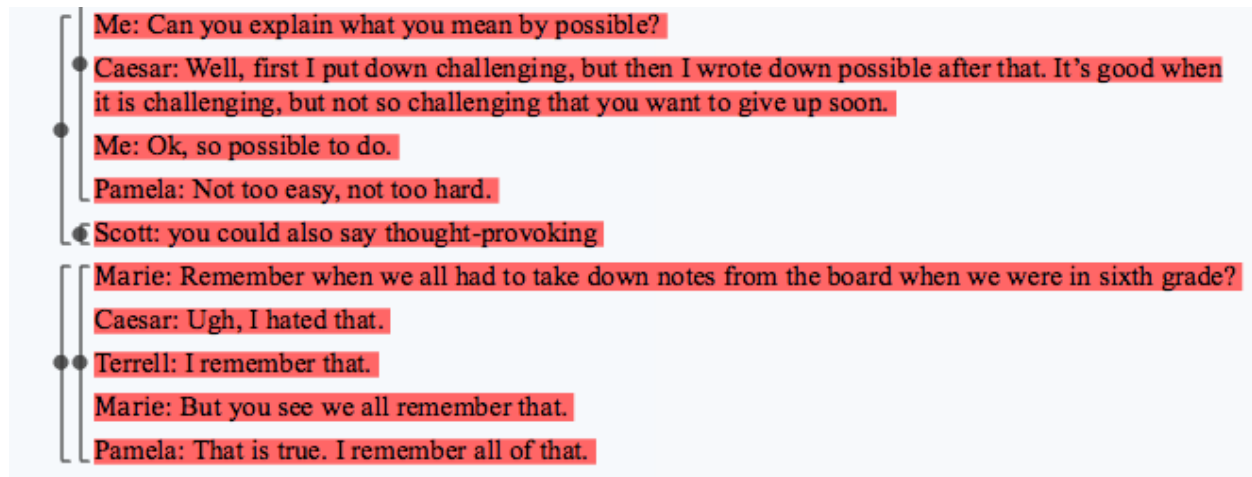


Figure 10. Transcript excerpt coded for *competence*.

Qualitative content analysis allows researchers to assign a unit of text to more than one category simultaneously. However, within one category, researchers should aim for assigning each unit of coding to only one subcategory. This process is essential for clarity and consistency. When researchers assign a unit of coding to more than one sub-category within a main category, it is likely that either the categories have not been clearly defined or the unit of coding is too broad (Schreier, 2012).

For example, the excerpt in *Figure 11* illustrates an instance of autonomy – “I like it when we get to read different perspectives like those. I like it when we can look at history from different perspectives.” However, this excerpt also demonstrates Christie’s perceptions of her competence: “Sometimes they are really hard to read, and Dr. B doesn’t always give us enough time to read through them before we discuss them. So that is tough.” I selected this entire passage for both autonomy and competence because I needed the entire chunk to understand the context of what this participant was saying about the assigned readings.

**Christie:** Yes, I really like it when we get to read different perspectives like those. I like it when we can look at history from different perspectives from the people who lived there. Sometimes, they are really hard to read, and Dr. B doesn't always give us enough time to read through them before we discuss them. So that is tough.

Figure 11. Excerpt from a transcript of an eleventh grade focus group session. I coded this excerpt for student perceptions of both *autonomy* and *competence*.

After coding the transcripts of teacher interviews and student focus groups for instances of autonomy, competence and relatedness, using Dedoose, I exported all of the excerpts by grade and by category (e.g. Grade 8, Autonomy) to Word documents. I re-read the text several times as I looked for specific subthemes for each main theme. For this data-driven phase of analysis, I used *initial* or *open* coding, a process used by grounded theory researchers, to discover concepts in data. During *initial* or *open* coding, researchers identify the properties of concepts and categories. Categories should “stand by themselves” as conceptual components of the theory, while properties are aspects or elements of the categories (Dey, 1999). Researchers develop categories and their properties by examining “fragments of data” that they code line-by-line, word-by-word, incident-to-incident, through *In Vivo* coding (the participant’s own “telling terms”) or in several other ways (Saldana, 2009). Rather than code for themes or topics, Charmaz (2006) suggests coding for actions by using gerunds (noun forms of verbs). Using gerunds makes the processes explicit, and “keeps analyses active and emergent” (p. 164).

For each chunk of text identified as instances of *autonomy*, *competence* or *relatedness*, I read the excerpt line-by-line to find specific subthemes or subcategories. Specifically, I looked for signs of how the students conceptualize autonomy, competence or relatedness, and I looked for instances of how the teachers perceive their autonomy, competence, and relatedness support for students. Figure 12 illustrates a sample of text from 8<sup>th</sup> grade Focus Group #1 that I had

already coded for autonomy. I examined each chunk of text and identified the open and in vivo codes.

Interview Transcript Text Grade 8 Autonomy: Focus Group #1 Transcript	Initial Open and In Vivo Codes
Line 44: Me: Can you tell me about a time here in class when you felt like you <u>were really engaged</u> ?	
Line 45 – 47: Caesar: I have had moments when I was like sitting down, like in the back of the class, looking at the board, writing down notes and I don't feel very engaged in it.	Back of class Looking at board Writing down notes Don't feel engaged
Line 47 – 48: Caesar: But when there is a group conversation, it's a long discussion and everyone is picked on, I feel very engaged	Group conversation Long discussion Everyone is picked on I feel very engaged
Lines: 48 – 49: Caesar: I listen to someone say something and then someone responds or I respond, and I share my own opinions, I feel very engaged in that.	I listen Someone responds I share my opinions I feel engaged

Figure 12. Text excerpt for initial open and in vivo codes for eighth grade focus group transcript. The text was coded for *autonomy*.

Once researchers determine initial codes, Charmaz (2006) suggests identifying those codes that are most significant or appear most often in the data. She refers to this phase as *focused coding*. During focused coding, researchers actively compare data to data and compare the developing codes with data, which in turn helps to refine the categories. This active process of comparing codes to data is called *constant comparison*. Charmaz (2006) describes constant comparison as comparing data with data, data with categories, categories with categories, and categories with concepts (p. 187). Whenever the researcher gathers new data, he or she compares them with previous “incidents” or categories. Each level of comparison suggests a new stage of analysis towards the development of theory. Constant comparison establishes “analytic distinctions” among categories (Charmaz, 2006, p. 54).



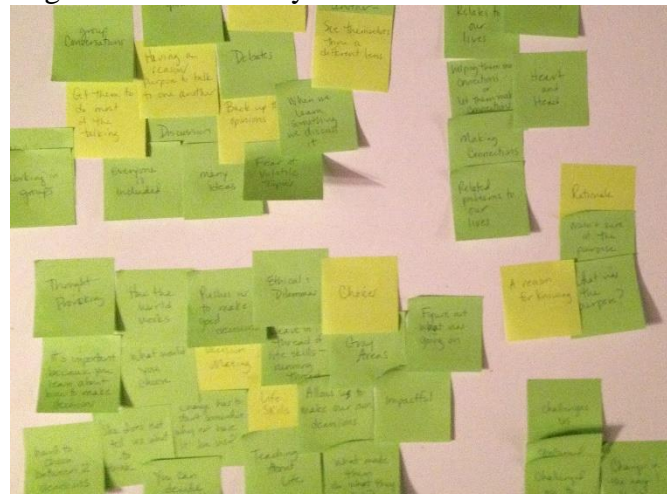
To help me visualize the codes and organize them by similar properties into larger categories, I stepped away from Dedoose and turned to a more tactile form of analysis – sticky notes. I wanted to be able to see the codes in front of me and to manipulate them easily. I wrote the initial codes or in vivo phrases from the first few interviews and focus groups on sticky notes and organized the sticky notes based on common themes. *Figures 13* and *14* illustrate how I initially organized “autonomy” open codes, seen below in pink (11<sup>th</sup> grade) and green (8<sup>th</sup> grade).

- Thinking for Ourselves
- Making Connections
- Looking at the Big Ideas
- Learning for a Reason
- Learning Through Discussion
- Doing Projects
- Asking Open-Ended Questions



*Figure 13.* Focused coding for 11<sup>th</sup> grade focus group transcript coded for autonomy using sticky notes. Organized the notes by common themes.

- Relating to Our Lives
- Perspective Taking
- Making Decisions
- Having Choices
- Discussions & Debates
- Working in Groups
- Feeling the Impact

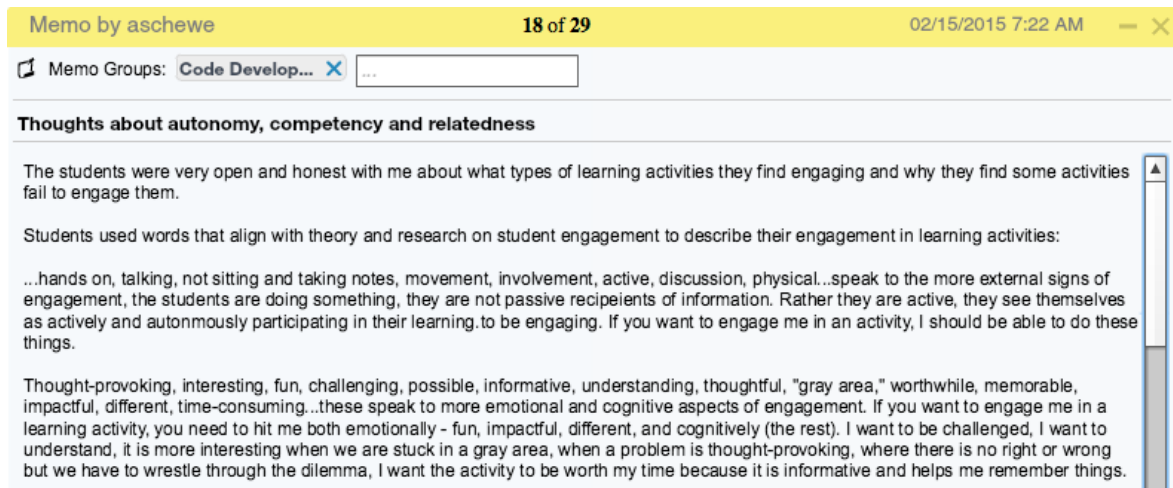


*Figure 14.* Focused coding for 8<sup>th</sup> grade focus group transcript coded for autonomy using sticky notes. Organized the notes by common themes.



Data analysis using constant comparison necessitates that researchers write and reflect on their decision-making and document the development of their interpretations of the emerging themes and categories. This process is called *memoing*. “Memos catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 72). Charmaz (2006) offers several suggestions for what to do in a memo including defining each code or category by its analytic properties, identifying gaps in the analysis, and using empirical evidence to support definitions of the category (p. 82).

Dedoose allows researchers to write and link memos to any imported media. After reading each interview or focus group transcript, I wrote memos to help me explore embedded themes and analyze the contexts that were supporting or hindering engagement. For example, after reading the transcript of the third 8<sup>th</sup> grade focus group, I wrote a memo to explore possible themes related to autonomy. *Figure 15* illustrates a short excerpt from that memo.



*Figure 15.* Text excerpt from a memo that the researcher wrote in response to reading the 8<sup>th</sup> grade focus group transcript.

Analysis of the data through *memoing* and *constant comparison* leads the researcher back to new sources of data in a process called *theoretical sampling*. Theoretical sampling enables researchers to seek out “people, events, or information to illuminate and define the boundaries

and relevance of the categories” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 189) and takes the researcher from the conceptual back to the empirical. The ideas developed in the initial stages of research shape the questions asked and data sought during theoretical sampling. Researchers look at documents, conduct observations, interview and re-interview participants, all with a focus on developing theoretical categories. When gathering “fresh data” no longer reveals new insights or properties for the theoretical categories, the category has *theoretical sufficiency* (Dey, 1999). After transcribing, analyzing and writing memos about each interview, reflection and focus group, I wrote additional notes about what information I wanted to “illuminate and define” in my next meetings with the teachers and the students.

After reading the transcripts of the first few teachers’ vignette reflections, I added several more codes; specifically, I added codes for the various types of activities that appeared to engage the students. Once I had a firm list of sub-themes or sub-categories within each of the main categories of autonomy, competency and relatedness, I added these codes into to Dedoose. Dedoose encourages researchers to define their codes and to place them in a hierarchical order within their broader categories. Figure 16 depicts this preliminary list of codes for autonomy, competence and relatedness. I added these codes to my coding scheme, defined each code and pulled examples from the text to illustrate each code.

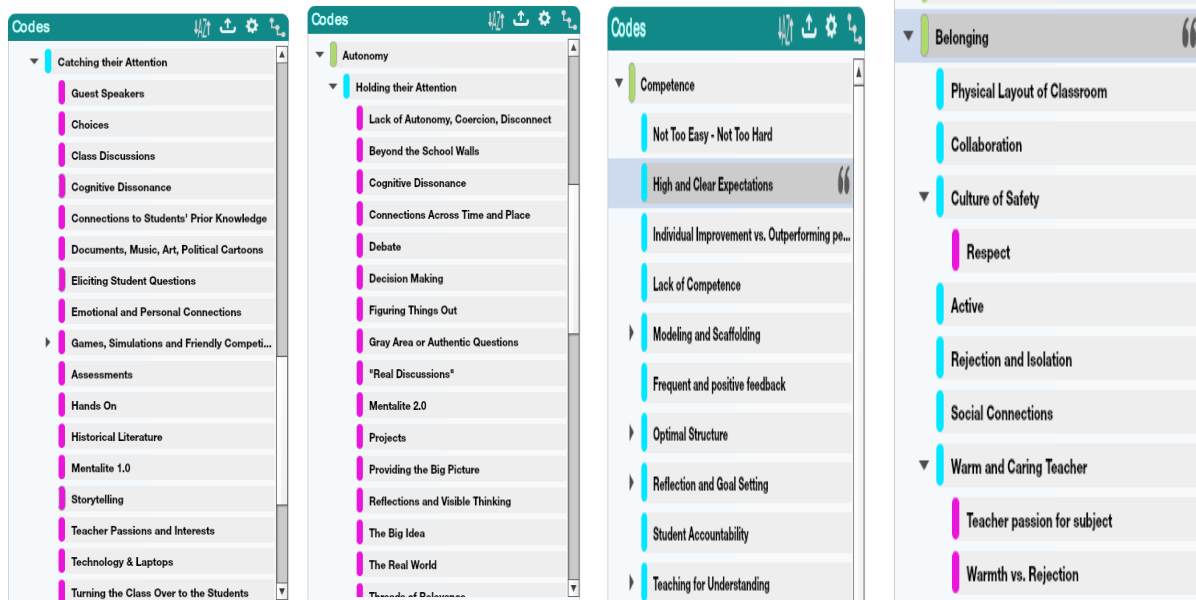


Figure 16. Preliminary codes for autonomy, competence and belonging as listed in Dedoose.

### Testing Your Coding Scheme on a Sample of Text

The fourth step in directed qualitative content analysis is to test the coding scheme on a sample of text. Using Dedoose, I re-read the transcripts of my interviews and reflections with the teachers and the transcripts of the student focus groups, and I applied the above codes. Throughout this process, it became clear that I had far too many codes for autonomy. I found that I was consistently assigning excerpts of text to more than one subcategory. When using qualitative content analysis, researchers may assign excerpts to more than one main category (i.e. autonomy, competence and relatedness). However, to insure that the subcategories are distinct and that the analysis is consistent, the subcategories within a main category must also be mutually exclusive (Schreier, 2012, p. 75). Therefore, researchers may assign units of coding to only one subcategory under autonomy. One area of duplication was I had initially listed specific learning activities as codes (e.g. Projects, Discussions, Debates, Guest Speakers, Role-Plays and Simulations, etc.). I was coding the text for both learning activity and for its descriptive qualities

(e.g. decision-making, cognitive dissonance, real world, etc.). It soon became apparent that it was not the learning activities themselves that teachers and students perceived as autonomous or controlling. Rather, what mattered to the teachers and students were the qualities of the learning activities. [I will return to this important revelation later in the final chapter]. In addition to removing the specific learning activities as codes in my overall coding frame, I used further constant comparison to subsume some codes under others. For example, there were many times when I referred to my coding manual to differentiate between autonomy codes “Then and Now” and “The Real World” or between “Figure it Out” and “Mentalite” or between “Discussion” and “Debate.”

To further reduce my codes, I reexamined by initial list of open and in vivo codes and looked for the semantic relationships among them (Spradley, 1980). After reading and rereading the interviews, reflections and focus group transcripts, and rereading my memos, I revised my coding scheme once again. *Figure 17* illustrates how I revised my coding frames for autonomy using the semantic relationship exercise. I subsumed the long list of codes for autonomy into six subcategories. The codes that I subsumed would serve as examples or properties of the larger subcategories.

<b>Autonomy Codes and Definitions</b>	<b>What do these codes have in common?</b>	<b>Resulting Autonomy Code or Subtheme</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Class Discussions</b></li> <li>• <b>“Turning class over to the students” (student presentations)</b></li> <li>• <b>Encouraging students to ask questions</b></li> <li>• <b>Debates &amp; Deliberation</b></li> <li>• <b>“Real Discussions”</b></li> <li>• <b>Sharing opinions</b></li> <li>• <b>Small groups, whole class, work in pairs</b></li> </ul>	<b>Types of Student Interactions in the Classroom</b>	<b>Connections through peer interactions</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>“Capturing their hearts”</b></li> <li>• <b>Games, Simulations, Movies, Guest Speakers, Music, Art</b></li> </ul>	<b>Types of Emotional Connections</b>	<b>Emotional Connections</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Having student identify what is interesting or important</b></li> <li>• <b>“Application activities”</b></li> </ul>	<b>Types of Personal Connections</b>	<b>Personal Connections</b>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Choices” (how to work, academic tasks, etc.)</li> <li>• “Reflections”</li> <li>• “Making connections to prior knowledge”</li> <li>• Learning new things (“I used to think, now I think”)</li> <li>• Using Visible Thinking Routines to promote thinking and reflection</li> </ul>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Figure It Out” – promoting student inquiry and curiosity</li> <li>• Mentalite: students look at history from multiple perspectives</li> <li>• Cognitive Dissonance – challenging students’ beliefs with new information</li> </ul>	Types of Student Inquiry	Connecting to Students’ Curiosity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moral dilemmas</li> <li>• “She helps us to make good choices”</li> <li>• Answering open-ended questions</li> <li>• Decision making – encouraging students to choose among different options</li> <li>• “Gray Area” – students prefer open-ended questions that have more than one answer</li> <li>• Mentalite 2.0: students come to understand events through eyes of historical actors</li> </ul>	Types of Problem Solving and Decision-Making	Connecting through perspective-taking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Threads of Relevance” – using essential questions or themes to tie learning together and provide students with a purpose “intentional teaching”</li> <li>• “Here and “There” – making connections across different places at the same time</li> <li>• “Then and Now” – making connections between history and current events</li> </ul>	Types of Patterns and Relationships for Learning Social Studies	Connecting through patterns
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The Real World” – presenting real world problems or challenges to solve or consider</li> </ul>		Connecting to the Real World

*Figure 17.* Reorganizing codes for autonomy by looking at semantic relationships, common properties and descriptions.

### Checking for Code Consistency

Qualitative content analysis requires that researchers check to make sure that the coding scheme is reliable. In other words, researchers need to insure that the coding scheme will be consistent between or among different researchers or for the same researcher at different points in time (Schreier, 2012). In cases where there are multiple researchers working on a study, the codes would be checked through an inter-coder agreement (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). However, as I was working alone on this study, I followed Schreier’s (2012) recommendation that I take some time, approximately two weeks, to step away from my coding scheme. Then,

two weeks later, I would recode the same text as I had coded previously. If my codes were consistent between two different points in time, I could feel confident in my coding consistency. Schreier (2012) cautions that, however, researchers should not label coding frames as consistent or inconsistent. Rather, they should examine the degree of consistency. If the coding at different points of time results in low consistency, it could mean that there are flaws in the coding frame. My second run-through of the data using my new coding scheme proved to be very similar to my first run-through.

### **Coding the Remaining Text and Checking for Consistency**

Once I believed that my codes were consistent, I coded the remaining text, which included the transcripts and field notes from my observation (including vignettes), student work samples, teacher handouts or planning documents, and photos of the classroom. I continued to check the coding consistency with my coding manual to prevent “drifting into an idiosyncratic sense of what the codes mean” (Schilling, 2006).

Patton (2002) argues that qualitative researchers need to monitor and report their analytical procedures and processes as completely and as truthfully as possible. When using qualitative content analysis, researchers should report their coding decisions and practices and the methods they used to establish trustworthiness in their study (Elo & Kyngas, 2007; Schreier, 2012; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). In the next section of this chapter, I present the steps I took to make sure that my readers could trust the methods that I used in this research study.

### **Insuring Quality**

Yin’s (2014) blueprint outlines the steps for conducting for the case study research

design. However, because qualitative researchers assert that understanding occurs through interpretation and representation, it is incumbent upon qualitative researchers to promote and enhance the case study's trustworthiness. Mishler (1990) defines *trustworthiness* as the degree to which a research study contributes to the academic dialogue on furthering democratic practices in schools. "The essential criterion for such judgments [of trustworthiness] is the degree to which we can rely on the concepts, methods, and inferences of a study, or tradition of inquiry, as the basis for our own theorizing and empirical research" (Mishler, 1990, p. 419).

For a qualitative study to be trustworthy, it must be *credible, transferable, dependable* and *confirmable* (Denzin, 1978). I promoted the trustworthiness of this study of student engagement in social studies in a variety of ways. Many authors suggest that by "triangulating data," or viewing phenomena from multiple perspectives, researchers can insure that findings are more "valid." No one source of data or one method for collecting data or one perspective on the data can achieve validity (Patton, 1990; Stake, 2010; Yin, 2009). However, Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) propose that the central image for "validity" in qualitative research is not the triangle, but is instead the crystal. While triangles represent "rigid, fixed, two-dimensional" objects, "crystals grow, change, alter..." and they combine "symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach..." (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963).

I *crystallized* this case study of student engagement by using a variety of methods of data collection and analysis, developing "thick descriptions" of multiple and conflicting interpretations of meanings about the phenomenon of engagement in social studies classrooms, and by using different forms to represent, organize, analyze and present interpretations of meanings to audiences. In-depth interviews, classroom observations, teacher reflections, student

focus groups, analysis of classroom contexts through documents and archival materials, and an online survey allowed me to examine potential themes and theories from a variety of “shapes” and “transmutations.” The study of multiple constructed realities in qualitative research requires investigators to attend to voices and interpretations other than their own (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The crystallization process allows writers to tell the same tale from different points of view.

Each type of data has strengths and weaknesses; using a variety of data sources increases the validity as the strengths of one source can help to compensate for the weaknesses of another approach (Patton, 1990). For example, classroom observations may only reveal external behaviors; researchers cannot see students’ emotional and cognitive engagement. Interviews or teacher reflections may be limiting because the participant responses may be subject to bias, fear, anxiety or even a lack of awareness. Observations can provide a check on what is reported in interviews, and interviews may allow the researcher to explore the participants’ internal beliefs and feelings. Teacher reflections on classroom observation make the researcher’s reconstruction of the classroom dynamic more dependable and valid. Document analysis of student work samples, assessments, lessons plans and other artifacts can provide additional information and offer prompts for discussions that might otherwise not have been considered. By using crystallization to select and analyze data, I can increase both the validity and the reliability of the study’s findings (Patton, 1990).

In addition to *crystallizing* the phenomenon of student engagement through a variety of angles and dimensions, I made every effort to respect the perspectives and the voices of participants. Prolonged exposure to participants over the course of five months allowed me to establish a rapport and a level of mutual trust with the teachers and students. As I collected and analyzed the data, participants had multiple opportunities to debrief and clarify my



interpretations and contribute new or additional perspectives on the case. I frequently shared my findings with the teachers and elicited their feedback on my emerging themes. Reflections on classroom vignettes provided teacher participants with the time and opportunity to reflect, to offer firsthand accounts of thoughts and feelings that might otherwise be missed in observations and interviews. I considered the teachers' needs to understand their students' engagement as important as my own need to understand. This member checking and participant reflexivity allowed my teacher participants and me to co-create meaning, to provide audiences with more authentic accounts of student engagement in social studies learning, and to insure that participant voices (the emic perspective) are heard and represented.

In addition to crystallizing the data and establishing an open, honest and reflexive relationship with my teacher participants, I also went to great lengths to follow the systematic process outlined in qualitative content analysis and to be transparent with how I went about analyzing my data. By building consistency checks throughout the data analysis process, such as double coding and constant comparison, I hoped to insure that my categories accurately represented the concepts in my research question.

Ultimately, I will judge the quality of this research study based on what Lather (1986) calls *catalytic validity*. *Catalytic validity* is the degree to which research leads to insight and, ideally activism, on the part of the participants. Though activism is not the stated goal of this project, my aim is to help the teacher participants gain both professional knowledge of "how engagement works when it works" (or how and why it does not work) in social studies, and to provide them with a deeper understanding and awareness of their craft.

In addition to adhering to the criteria of trustworthiness, Patton (2002) suggests that insuring the quality and credibility of qualitative inquiries conducted within a constructivist

research paradigm requires the researcher to acknowledge his/her subjectivities – before, during and after data collection and analysis. Journaling throughout the research process allowed me to reflect not only on my own emotional, cognitive and behavioral engagement in the research study, but also on the potential conflicts that could result from my dual roles as researcher and parent. I gauged my interpretations to insure that I maintained the lines between researcher and parent – and reflected on those perspectives when lines are blurred. In addition, I was transparent with participants regarding my philosophies on experiential and progressive education. The credibility, competence and perceived trustworthiness of the researcher are critical for the overall trustworthiness of the study (Patton, 1990).

### **Study Limitations**

The limitations of a constructivist/interpretivist research paradigm, specifically of a qualitative case study research design, speak to issues of generalizability and claims of *truth*. This approach to research calls on researchers to examine meaning from the participants' perspectives and requires that researchers refrain from criticizing or drawing conclusions from a critical lens. Instead, Crotty (1998) notes, one is to “observe it [the culture] as closely as possible, attempt to take the place of those within the culture, and search out the insider's perspective” (p. 76). Since interpretations of experiences are what I sought, I tried to resist the urge to examine these experiences critically. My research examined classroom experiences and interactions in the particular situations in which they occurred at the times during which they happened. While it was tempting to consider the power structures underlying the classroom interactions, and perhaps to want to change those structures through my research, my chosen

theoretical perspective defines the parameters as interpreting, rather than changing, social structures.

While researchers working within a constructivist/interpretivist paradigm do not claim to present “the truth” about a phenomenon or their participants’ experiences, they do have a responsibility to render interpretations of the empirical world as accurately as possible (Bodgan & Bilkin, 2007). As someone who hopes to eventually reform social studies curriculum and instruction, I wrestle with the idea that there are no *Truths* or identifiable answers to questions of what knowledge is possible or how we come to construct that knowledge. I would like to be able to claim that student engagement “works” in social studies, to convince teachers, administrators and policy makers that supporting students’ autonomy, competency and relatedness will engage students emotionally, cognitively and behaviorally; that student engagement in social studies can fulfill the promise of the discipline to create citizens who exhibit enlightened political engagement (Parker, 2008). However, this research paradigm seeks to understand, rather than to claim the existence of *Truths*, emancipate marginalized groups or change existing structures. Thus, this research study can contribute to the dialogue on the need for better understanding, but at this time, perhaps not on the strategies for change.

Perhaps the biggest limitation to this study, as with all qualitative research, is the inability to generalize my findings. Due to the subjectivity of the research – the limited numbers of students and teachers in my study, the rather unique and privileged research setting, the use of multiple and contextual data sources methods, and the interpretive and collaborative nature of the meaning making – I am not able to generalize my findings to students and teachers in other classroom settings. The inability to generalize findings is disconcerting, since the purpose of this study is to use a case study design to extend an evolving line of inquiry that investigates how

adolescents' emotional, cognitive and behavioral engagement in learning social studies might be more effectively promoted and supported. For now, however, I am content to provide one window on the complexities and subtleties of how teachers facilitate student engagement in social studies learning.

### **Study Timeline**

The study began in September of 2014 once IRB consent was obtained. In September of 2014, I met with the teacher participants to formalize the study and gather signed informed consent forms. In September, 2014, I conducted and transcribed initial in-depth teacher interviews, and I began “reconnaissance” (Wolcott, 2008) in the classrooms. As soon as I obtained parental consent and student assent for participation in mid-September, I began data collection at the research site. Weekly observations, teacher interviews, focus groups, and artifact collection occurred throughout the semester and concluded by March of 2015. Data analysis took place simultaneously with data collection. I wrote the bulk of the findings and discussion between March and September of 2015. I wrote up the discussion between October and December 2015. Revisions took place in December 2015 and January 2016. My defense took place in March 2016 with graduation taking place soon after that.

### **Summary**

Student engagement in learning activities is context dependent (Christenson et al, 2012; Connell & Wellborn, 1990; Deci & Ryan, 2002, LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Skinner & Pintzer, 2012). While a great deal is known about what types of classroom contexts foster student engagement, little is known about how social studies teachers create those classroom contexts

that support and sustain their students' engagement or what those contexts look and sound like in real classrooms (Anderman et al., 2011). The purpose of this study was to understand how student engagement functions in middle and high school social studies classrooms. Using a multiple case study research design, I examined students' relationships, interactions and experiences with teachers and other classroom contexts to deconstruct and then reconstruct the phenomenon of adolescents' engagement in learning social studies.

Through extensive field notes gathered during weekly classroom observations, in-depth interviews with teachers, student focus groups, teacher reflections and additional archival and document resources, I was able to represent my interpretations of student engagement in social studies classrooms. A qualitative content analysis of these multiple and varied data sources was guided by self-determination theory. However, new theories that emerge from this study may help educators understand how student engagement in social studies learning works when it works (or does not work). The qualitative nature of this study requires that I substantiate the study's trustworthiness by integrating checks and balances throughout data collection and analysis. An intense and prolonged exposure to classroom interactions, the crystallization of data and viewpoints, frequent member checks, researcher and participant collaboration and reflexivity, recognition and disclosure of researcher subjectivities, an acknowledgement of the study's limitations, and a focus on "catalytic validity," all serve to enhance the overall credibility and dependability of the case study.

Case study research design provides one way of seeing the world. This qualitative case study provides a structure for interpreting experiences of student engagement, a method to transform the world of student engagement into a series of representations, and a lens through which student engagement can be made visible. Yin (2014) notes that, "engagement, enticement

and seduction are unusual characteristics of case studies” (p. 206). Unfortunately, these are also unusual characteristics of middle and high school social studies classrooms. My goal is that this research study serves to counter the first claim, and demonstrate to social studies educators how they may counter the second.

## CHAPTER 4: EIGHTH GRADE CASE RESULTS

*This is not just about content and knowledge. This is about decision-making and how people make good decisions. It's about choices that have been made in history...*

~ Lisa Randall, 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Social Studies Teacher, The Gateway School

### Introduction

The Skinner-Pitzer (2012) model of motivational development provides a conceptual lens for addressing how social studies teachers might engage students in learning activities. At the heart of this motivational model is self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Self-determination theory researchers Deci and Ryan (2002) distinguish between different types of motivation based on the reasons that students have for being motivated to engage in learning activities. When students are *intrinsically* motivated, they participate in academic work because the learning activity is inherently interesting or enjoyable and without regard to any external reward. In contrast, *extrinsically* motivated students participate in an activity because of a separate outcome or reward (e.g. homework passes, good grades, parental or teacher praise, etc.).

While Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that intrinsic motivation results in high-quality learning and creativity in the classroom, they also argue that extrinsic motivation can result in high-quality learning, depending on the students' motives for engaging in academic work. "Because many of the tasks that educators want their students to perform are not inherently interesting or enjoyable, knowing how to promote more active and volitional (versus passive and controlling) forms of extrinsic motivation becomes an essential strategy for successful teaching" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 55). These theorists conceive of a student's engagement in learning activities along continuum, from being controlled fully by extrinsic motivators to being fully autonomous and propelled by intrinsic motivation. With each phase along this continuum, the

students begin to internalize the reasons for engaging in work as he or she becomes more autonomous and self-regulated (see Figure 4).

Since social studies teaching and learning is not inherently interesting for many students (Schug, Todd, & Beery, 1984; Shaughnessy & Haladyna, 1985; VanSickle, 1990; Zhao & Hoge, 2005), teachers must find ways to activate student motivation externally. One of the primary reasons students willingly participate in learning activities is because their teachers or their peers in the classroom, to whom they feel connected, value those activities. Therefore, at the heart of helping students to internalize reasons for engaging in learning activities is providing students with a sense of *relatedness* to their teachers and their peers in the classroom. Thus, before students willingly accept the value of the learning activities, they need to feel respected and cared for by their teacher (Ryan and Deci, 2002).

In addition to needing to feel safe in the classroom, students need to feel that they can be successful or *competent* as they pursue their teachers' learning goals (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). Drawing on decades of empirical research, self-determination researchers suggest that teachers can support students' needs to feel competent by providing "optimally challenging" activities, clear expectations in the form of learning goals and explicit directions, scaffolding to assist in student learning, frequent and constructive feedback, as opposed to evaluative and norm-based feedback, and opportunities for students to reflect on their work.

Students who have warm and caring teachers who support their needs to feel successful may still not be motivated to learn if they do not understand why they need to engage in learning activities. Thus, Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that *autonomy* support is *the* critical element for motivating students to engage in learning activities. These researchers argue that before they will engage in learning, students must understand and internalize the meaning and worth of the



learning. The implications of theory and research on self-determination theory for social studies curriculum and instruction are based on the premise that the value that students place on subject matter tasks and activities is integral to maintaining their interest, internalizing their sources of motivation and connecting the content with their self-identity (Brophy, 2004). When teachers promote student autonomy in a structured, warm and safe environment, they can help activate students' existing motivation to engage in learning.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I describe what I found when I looked for evidence of autonomy, competence and relatedness-supportive learning contexts in two classrooms – Lisa Randall's (pseudonym) eighth grade classroom and Emmett Blackwell's (pseudonym) eleventh grade classroom. I present these findings from various perspectives and through different lenses, including the teachers', their students' and the researchers'. My goal is to interpret experiences of student engagement in learning activities in their natural classroom contexts, transform the world of student engagement into a series of representations, and make those experiences visible for my readers.

Such interpretations present several challenges for the researcher/writer. How can I represent my participants' views of reality, and at the same time interpret their views from a researcher's perspective? How can my readers trust these accounts and the meanings and interpretations I ascribe to them? Moreover, how can I present these accounts while at the same time engage my readers? To address these challenges, I turned to the use of vignettes. Authors Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul, in their book *On Writing Qualitative Research: Living by Words* (1997), describe vignettes as:

Compact sketches that can be used to introduce characters, foreshadow events and analysis to come, highlight particular findings, or summarize a particular theme or issue

in analysis and interpretation. Vignettes are composites that encapsulate what the researcher finds through fieldwork. In every case, vignettes demand attention and represent a growing sense of understanding about the meaning of the research work (p. 70).

My intent in using vignettes is to invite my readers “to step into the space of vicarious experience, to assume a position in the world of the research – to live the lived experience along with the researcher” (p. 72). I hope to give voice to my ‘characters,’ and invite my readers into my observations, interviews and focus groups to experience student engagement, or disengagement, as I experienced it.

### **Getting to Know Lisa**

Lisa Randall is a Caucasian female in her late-50s. She has been teaching at The Gateway School for 32 years. Born and raised in Louisiana, Lisa attended Louisiana State University, graduating with a B.A. in General Studies. Soon after she graduated, she decided to move from Louisiana to a large metropolitan southeastern city. The only person she knew in that city was one of her former summer camp counselors, who happened to teach at The Gateway School. I constructed the following portrait vignette based on my interview with Lisa and on our many conversations over the course of the research study.

*When Gateway’s founder interviewed me for a teaching job, he asked just one question: “Do you like children?” That was it. I had been a camper and then a camp counselor most of my life until that point, so of course I said, “I love kids!” I took the only openings they had here – teaching three and four year olds and coaching the girls’ high school basketball team. I liked teaching the little kids, but when a job opened up for middle school social studies, I jumped on it. I love this age!*

*I also love teaching social studies! I like the fact that I do not have to stress over testing. If I taught math or English, I might stress out about preparing my students to take tests like the SATs or ACTs. I am not really a content-driven teacher because I do not have to be. It is just not my personality. The content is important, but life is more important. In my class, I like to have a running thread of life skills, character development and teaching the kids to have a moral compass. I teach American History, post-Civil War to the present, but it is not all about the content. What starts as a story about white male Protestants, soon becomes a story about African Americans, women, children, immigrants and other groups of people who have gained freedoms over time. They have these freedoms today because of all of the courageous people who made those freedoms possible. I try to help the students make connections between then and now.*

*For many years, I was running on autopilot, and I was able to get by on my years of experience and the freedom that Gateway gave me as a teacher. Until recently, I have not given much thought to the goals or outcomes of my teaching. It sounds like a confession, doesn't it? I knew my content, and I knew I was engaging my students in meaningful ways. I also knew I connected with the kids. But good teaching is not just about caring about your students and teaching them content in an engaging way. When I begin to think about student engagement, especially getting the students to think deeply about the big ideas in history, being on autopilot just does not feel right anymore. I am up for a new challenge – to teach more intentionally for student engagement. (Appendix C.1)*



Figure 18. Eighth grade dilemma paradigms and core values.

### **The Setting: Lisa's Classroom**

The first thing I notice before entering Lisa's classroom is a basketball hoop on her door. Lisa explains that her students need to move around and release energy. As she shared in her interview, after sitting in a professional development class all day, Lisa was "dying" from the lack of movement. "I cannot expect them to do [sit in a desk all day] what I just couldn't do" (Appendix C.1, 313-314). Interestingly, there does not appear to be a front or back to Lisa's small rectangular classroom. On one of the long walls is a large Promethean Board flanked by two large bulletin boards. These boards are reserved for displays of student work, essential questions, and occasionally for sticky notes depicting student responses to visible thinking exercises such as "See, Think, Wonder" or "I Used to Think; Now I Think" (Ritchhart, et al., 2011). In the moments just before class begins, students often gather around these large boards, which serve as both discussion starters and sources of pride for the students. On the wall directly across from the Promethean Board is a large dry erase white board, also flanked by cork bulletin boards. To the left of the white board is a display: Moral and Ethical Dilemmas (see *Figure 18*). For most of my observations, Lisa arranges her 20 or so desks in a rectangle. Any change in desk configuration signals to the students that something different is about to happen. Lisa's desk is located in the far left corner of the room. Surrounding the walls near Lisa's desk are pictures of Lisa with family members and former students.

### **The Eighth Grade Student Focus Group**

Over the course of my time at The Gateway School (September 2014 – February 2015), I met with three boys and three girls, whom I referred to as my "eighth grade focus group." Their names (student-selected pseudonyms) are: Caesar, Terrell, Scott, Jane, Pamela, and Marie. We met once a month in Lisa's room during the students' lunch and recess periods. During our one-

hour meetings, we had pizza and soda and talked about engagement in learning social studies. They described, in their own words, their needs for autonomy, competency and relatedness. The following portrait vignette depicts what I heard them say about how and why they engage, or do not engage, in learning social studies.

*If you want to engage us, the activity should be hands on and involve me in something other than just sitting and taking notes. In other words, we want to be active and involved. We also believe that activities should be memorable; we remember stories and activities when they are impactful. More than anything, we like to be social, which means lots of talking with one another. We love to share our opinions and have time-consuming discussions where everyone talks* (Appendix E.3).

*Activities should not just be fun and different, but they also need to be thought provoking, interesting, and worthwhile. Learning is more interesting when we have to think about gray areas, when our teacher asks us questions that do not have right or wrong answers. We really like to have to wrestle with dilemmas because they make us think. We want activities to be worth our time because they are informative and helps us remember things* (Appendix E.3).

*Even when activities are fun, we may not engage if we do not feel challenged. We actually prefer when the work is challenging, as long as the work is possible, not too hard or makes us want to give up* (Appendix E.3). *We also appreciate it when our teachers teach the subject in a way so students, at all different levels, understand it thoroughly* (Appendix E.1). *We also really appreciate it when our teacher gives us clear directions, when she asks us lots of questions to make sure we know it, and when she makes sure that you know what you have to do* (Appendix E.1).

*Finally, we know when our teachers care about us because they make us feel safe in the classroom and they take an interest in us outside the classroom. We really appreciate it when our teachers get to know us as people, when they come to our baseball and basketball games or they come to watch our music recitals or plays. We work harder for teachers who push you to be your best and don't give up on you. When a teacher is willing to ask for our feedback when a lesson does not go right or when she admits when she has made a mistake, we know that she cares about us and it makes us want to engage in the work she gives us.*

The students' voices, presented throughout Chapter 4, speak volumes about how young 13 and 14 year-old-students experience social studies learning activities. I will return to the students' perceptions of engagement throughout the rest of the chapter as I strive to "make visible" what social studies learning looks like when classroom contexts support, or hinder, student engagement. Throughout the remainder of Chapter 4, I describe what I found when I looked for autonomy, competency and relatedness-supportive instructional practices and qualities of learning activities in Lisa's eighth grade classroom.

As I explained in Chapter 3, I developed categories or themes for autonomy-supportive practices using inductive analysis of the data; I drew directly on the data to develop and describe what I deemed autonomy-supportive practices in both classrooms. These category titles and descriptions represent my understanding of those practices that support student autonomy, specifically in social studies learning activities. In contrast, I used deductive analysis and turned to Deci and Ryan's (2002) self-determination theory to develop descriptions of competency- and relatedness-supportive educator practices in the classroom. I began with the categories suggested by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002) and then looked for how those categories manifest themselves in Lisa's classroom. Thus, I used both inductive and deductive analysis

procedures to help me describe the phenomenon of student engagement in social studies learning activities (see Chapter 3 for an in-depth description of how I developed the categories presented in Chapters 4 and 5).

### **Autonomy-Supportive Instructional Contexts**

#### **Catch My Attention**

*My teacher supports my autonomy by catching my attention and interest in an activity that is fun or unusual, involves movement, or ignites an emotional response.*

Most good teachers look for ways to catch students' attention. Students are more likely to become interested in learning activities when they are fun, new, different or unusual (Bergin, 1999). Teachers might change the setting for the lesson (e.g. have class outside, go on a field trip), introduce a new activity (e.g. a court drama simulation or a video game) or a present a new form of assessment (e.g. a "dinner party" instead of a test).

When I asked Lisa about her own engagement in high school, she remembered taking an interdisciplinary course in Art History and English. "We were given paintings to look at, to

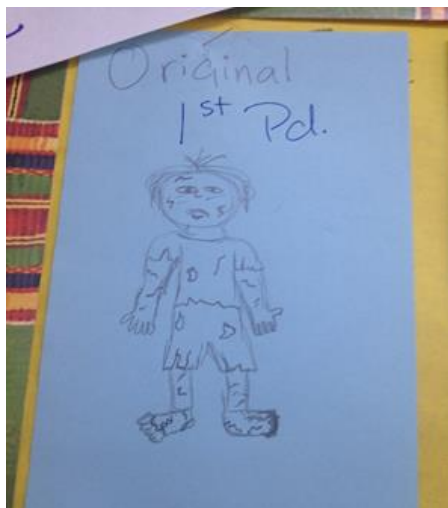


Figure 18. Assembly Line Drawing

analyze, and to try to figure out what was going on during that time in history. We had to write papers about it. We worked in small groups and had round table discussions about it. It just stood out to me that it was just so unusual” (Appendix C.1, 39-40). While this learning experience addresses several engaging qualities, (e.g. curiosity, learning with others, etc.), it is the “unusualness” of the activity that Lisa remembers most clearly.

In my interviews and observations of Lisa and her students, I found many examples of these “catch” factors of learning activities (Dewey, 1913). During Lisa’s Civil Rights Movement unit, for example, the students engage in simulations, watch excerpts from the documentary video *Eyes on the Prize*, reflect on civil rights songs, hear from a guest speaker, visit the Civil Rights Museum and watch the movie *Selma*. When I ask the six students in my focus group in an online survey, “Which activities interest or engage you in learning?” all six rank role plays and simulations, guest speakers, watching videos and going on field trips as somewhat or very engaging (Appendix F).

To “keep things fresh,” Lisa uses short simulations to spark student interest in the content and to help the learning come to life. For example, during her unit on the Industrial Revolution, she developed a simulation of life on an assembly line:

I make it very cold. I pick a foreman. I turn the chairs backwards, the desks are close together, and they have to kneel the whole time. I have a radio blaring loudly, and the lights are out because the owner cannot afford electricity. They have to create a picture. The foreman assigns each worker a job – “You draw the head, you draw the eyes, you draw the nose.” She shows them the picture and they have to create it as close to the original as they can. Then, the 7th grade social studies teacher comes in because he is the owner. He is screaming as loud as he can that they have to move faster and then the



owner and the foreman scream that these products are unacceptable and they scrunch them up and throw them away and they tell the workers that they only get paid by the pictures they produce that are acceptable. Some of the students go on strike, some quit all together. We have been learning about child labor, so this simulation really helps that come alive. (Appendix C.1, 277-291)

I observed the class the day after the assembly line simulation. When I entered the classroom, the students were huddled around the bulletin board, which displayed the assembly line “products.” The students excitedly reenacted their experiences; “You were too nice to be the foreman!” “Can you imagine doing that all day every day?” Looking at the “We’re on strike!” posters created by other classes, some of the students argued, “But, I didn’t even know we could strike!” and “I thought about it, but I was too scared to strike!” (Appendix A.1).

The students describe their engagement in the assembly line in terms of emotions, surprise and unusualness. Several months later, when asked to reflect on this simulation, Caesar describes the assembly line as *memorable*. “It is easier to remember those things because it’s not what you think it would be like” (Appendix E.3, 73-74). Pamela does not think the assembly line activity was necessarily *engaging*, but she does describe it as *memorable* because “We were just really caught off guard. Since we were all kind of thrown in, we were all kind of figuring out what was going on and we were not really focused on what we were doing” (Appendix E.3, 83-84).

Interestingly, when I ask the students in my eleventh grade focus group to share examples of when they were engaged in learning social studies, several of the students mentions the eighth grade simulation of the assembly line. Melinda recalls: “I was really upset that I missed it because everyone was talking the next day about how much they got into it, and like they were

so afraid” (Appendix E.4, 157-58). “Yeah, I remember that. I was there,” Beth chimes in. She recalls all of the details of the assembly line simulation. “That was a really cool day. I remember that” (Appendix E.4, 168). Not only did the students remember the details of the activity, but as Melinda recalled, “You also see the importance of it too” (Appendix E.4, 173)

The students describe this simulation as memorable, and they seem to have internalized the emotions associated with the experience. Whether or not they internalize the meaning and importance of learning about working conditions during the Industrial Revolution, or if they can explain *why* they needed to learn about working conditions in the late 1800s, is unclear from this exchange. The simulation itself does not necessarily provide a meaningful rationale for learning the content; rather, the purpose of this simulation activity is to make the learning come alive for students, to activate their emotional connection to the content and to provide a spark to gain students’ interest (Appendix D.1).

### **Allow me to respond personally**

*My teacher supports my autonomy by allowing me to express my own opinions or perspectives during learning activities.*

This type of autonomy support differs from an emotional reaction or response to a feature of an activity. Rather, when teachers encourage their students to connect with and respond to the content, the students begin to internalize the meaning and relevance of the learning. Lisa uses several strategies to help her students develop personal connections to the content. Borrowing from the book *Making Thinking Visible* by Ritchhart, Church and Morrison (2011), Lisa uses thinking routines such as “3-2-1” and “See, Think, Wonder” to help students respond personally to learning activities. For example, after a brief simulation to help students feel “the sting of

discrimination,” Lisa asks the students to write reflections using *three* words to describe discrimination, *two* questions they have about discrimination and *one* metaphor or simile about discrimination (Appendix A.4). Students ask questions such as: “When did society decide that a darker skin color was less superior than a lighter one?” “Is equality possible?” and “Why did the Civil Rights Movement take so long to happen in America?” (Appendix G.2). When teachers elicit students’ questions about the content, they help to promote their students’ autonomy because the students form their own personal connections to the content.

In “See, Think, Wonder,” students examine a visual (a photo, a video, a cartoon, etc.). First, they look carefully at the image and write down everything they *see*. Next, based on what they see, they write down what they *think* is happening in the visual image. Finally, they write down what they still *wonder* about the image. Lisa uses this routine with the television series *Eyes on the Prize*. After the students watch a clip of the video, they write down on sticky notes what they saw, what they thought was happening based on what they saw, and what they still wondered about the documentary video. In retrospect, Lisa notes that in the future, she will not use “See, Think, Wonder” with a documentary video, or if she does, she will turn the volume off. While the students noted what they saw, the narrator or the dialogue explained what was happening. The activity does not activate the students’ curiosity as Lisa hoped it would. However, it does allow students to personally connect to what they saw in the video. For several days after Lisa showed the video, the students continue to post their questions about the video content (Appendix, G.3).

By using “3-2-1” and “See, Think, Wonder” to elicit student responses to the content, either at the beginning of the unit or throughout, Lisa is able to gauge what her students find personally interesting or meaningful about the topic. Self-determination theory assumes that

humans naturally seek knowledge about the world (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Eliciting student questions is easy; what to do with all of these questions is another story. Lisa posts all of the questions for the students to see; but can she or should she attempt to answer all of these questions? To support students' autonomy, Lisa reflects that next time she might have the students group similar questions and then come up with two or three questions to guide the unit (Appendix D.1). In this way, the students are initiating and guiding their learning within the context that Lisa establishes.

Another way that Lisa encourages the students to respond personally to the content is to have them write reflections, for example, on a reading or a song, or on how they experience a particular learning activity. For example, after seeing the movie *Selma*, Lisa asks her students to reflect on the movie by answering three questions: 1) What scene moved you the most and why? 2) Do you think all kids should see this movie? Why, or why not? 3) Choose one of the following perspectives from the march: a police officer, one of the people marching, a journalist, or someone watching the march on television. What were your feelings? What did the scene look like? What do you think happened? (Appendix G.1). Marie's reflection illustrates her personal connection to the film, "Selma is eye opening, gut wrenching, and truth telling... This movie made me feel like I was there. I cried as I realized how awful and true these events were" (Appendix G.1). For Caesar, Lisa's reflection assignment provides an avenue to demonstrate an emotional connection with the march:

(from the point of view of a marcher) \*BANG\* A shot rang through the crowd, making me jump. It seemed to all happen in slow motion. First, we were marching. Then a mob of angry, gas-masked police officers charged at us. I was too shocked to move... \*CRACK\* An officer's nightstick ran into my spine. I felt thud and tried to crawl

away. As I looked up, I noticed a sea of fog ahead of me. \*CRACK\* The nightstick hits me again, this time forcing blood to spew from my mouth. He grabbed my collar. “Think of this as a warning to all you n\*\*\*\*\*!” The word hurt far more than the beating...

These reflections focus students’ attention on the meaning of their experience with the movie *Selma*. Without reflecting on the movie (or the simulation or the music or the field trip, etc.), the students might associate the experience of watching the movie simply with having had fun rather than on what they learn.

In addition to using thinking routines and reflections to help students connect personally to the content, Lisa also looks for opportunities for students to connect to the content through conversations with their parents and grandparents. During a class conversation on the role of the white southern housewives in putting an end to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Pamela shares that she talked about this subject with her mother:

If whites were helping blacks, then white status might go down...I talked to my mother about this, that status is so important. So if you grow up with this group of people and your families are close, and they do the same routine all the time, you have to go to the same high school and do the same things as everyone and they are afraid to change...they are afraid to lose their status within the group. (Appendix A.6, 99-103)

Lisa later reflects on this example and shares that many of her students insisted on taking their parents or grandparents to see the movie *Selma*. “That has always been a goal of mine, to bring those generations together in looking at history. Especially grandparents when we start looking at WWII, and I have them call their grandparents and conduct an interview. It is truly about the connections” (Appendix D.1, 209-210).

## Choices

*I am able to choose what or whom I learn about, with whom I work, how I learn best, and how I can demonstrate what I have learned. I am in control of my learning.*

When students are invited to choose what they study (e.g. project topics), how they learn content (e.g. textbooks, online sources, historical fiction, etc.), or how they present what they have learned (e.g. tests, blogs, papers, group projects), they are acting autonomously; in other words, they are directing and controlling at least some aspects of their learning. Lisa shares, “I like to give my students choices” (Appendix C.1, 116-117).

One way that Lisa supports student choice is asking students to choose what they think is most interesting or important in their assigned homework readings. I find that more students raise their hands to contribute when the task is to share something interesting or important from the chapter than when they have to answer specific questions from the textbook. Sharing an interesting fact or a picture carries less pressure than answering a question that has a right or wrong answer. In addition, when students are asked to look for the interest or relevance in the content, they are acting more autonomously than if the teacher tells them what is important to know. Although the students are often unable to articulate *why* they think a passage or a quote or a picture is important, the act of choosing what is or is not valuable can be self-fulfilling because the students engage under the assumption is that there is value in the reading.

Lisa also supports student choice when assigning projects. For the Civil Right Movement unit, Lisa gives her students the freedom to choose among 30 civil rights leaders. This list does not include Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks because the students traditionally associate the Civil Rights Movement with these individuals. Lisa wants her students to examine

what makes ordinary citizens engage in extraordinary feats of courage. “They had much more buy-in than if I had assigned them their activists” (Appendix D.1, 320-321).

Student buy-in is integral to student engagement. “I had read *March* over the summer, that was my summer reading book,” Caesar shares. “So, when I saw John Lewis on the list, I said I’ve gotta be John Lewis! I know this!” (Appendix E.3, 140-141). “I thought that too! I felt like I knew him,” Terrell shares about his “becoming” Frank Johnson, a judge who was integral to the Civil Rights Movement. “He is a real person!” (Appendix E.3, 136-137). Terrell is elated to see Frank Johnson in the movie *Selma* and featured in the Civil Rights Museum. He clearly feels a connection to his “person.”

While Lisa appears to be comfortable letting students choose these types of independent or group projects, she has mixed feelings when it comes to letting students choose how they demonstrate their learning. When assessing what the students have learned, Lisa notes, “I try to switch things around so it stays fresh to me. It is not generally a test. It can be a blog, it can be a paper, or it can be a group project. Yet, I am an eighth grade teacher, and they are going to high school next year, so they have to know how to take tests” (Appendix C.1, 238-239). Lisa feels the tension between providing authentic assessments and preparing students for the rigors of high school. She acknowledges that tests are not always the most effective or engaging forms of assessment; however, she wants her students to know how to study for and take tests.

Allowing students to choose how they demonstrate their learning is another strategy to support student autonomy because they perceive they have control over their work. Giving students the right to choose what or how they learn may seem obvious, but understanding how giving students choices activates powerful inner motivational forces to direct one’s learning

might lead more teachers to consider finding ways to integrate choice and voice into learning activities.

### **Interacting and Learning with Others**

*My teacher supports my autonomy when she provides opportunities for us to interact and learn with each other. I am able to share my opinions and have others respond to me in an interactive exchange of ideas.*

Interacting and learning with others requires some type of exchange of information, whether the students are in a whole group, in small groups or even in pairs. The eighth grade students repeatedly mention discussions as the most engaging activity in social studies. The online survey further reveals that the majority of the students in the eighth grade focus group note that *classroom discussions and debates* engage them “very much” (Appendix F). In fact, the students rank “discussions and debates” as more engaging than any of the other learning activities, including field trips, projects, and watching movies.

There are many different forms of discussion, and defining discussion has become a matter of contentious debate (Hess, 2009). For the eighth grade students, discussions are engaging when “there are multiple ideas and theories presented” (Appendix E.1, 5-6). Multiple ideas and theories require multiple people participating. Caesar shares that he feels “very engaged” in discussions when they are “long” and “everyone is picked on.” He adds, “I listen to someone say something and then someone responds or I respond, and I share my own opinions. I feel very engaged in that” (Appendix E.1, 51-53). Pamela and Caesar suggest that for discussions to be engaging, everyone should be included. Scott suggests that learning with and from his classmates is also critical for his engagement:



I like the way she [Mrs. Randall] teaches. You don't just write notes and take a test, and get a grade. When we learn something, we discuss it, and then you are learning from your friends. It's like the students are teaching each other not just the teacher teaching the students. That is what I think I like about social studies." (Appendix E.1, 202-204)

These students describe engaging discussions as exchanges of opinions and information among the students themselves. They qualify good discussions as those in which "everyone is picked on," there are "multiple ideas and theories," and you are "learning from your friends" (Appendix E.1).

In this sense, discussions in Lisa's class have a "shared situation with a shared purpose" (Parker, 2005). This type of purposeful classroom discussion allows students to share their views and at the same time clarify or change their views based on their exchanges with others. When discussions take this form, they support student autonomy because they enable students to actively work through problems or questions by interacting with others. The students suggest that they enjoy the social aspect of discussions, but they also identify that discussions help them learn and clarify their perspectives on issues.

One example of such a discussion is the Civil Rights Dinner Party, which is the culminating activity for Lisa's civil rights unit. To prepare for the dinner party, the students assume the roles of various civil rights activists, and they conduct research to learn about their activists; eventually they share their stories at the Civil Rights Dinner Party. The students prepare "placemats" that serve as "cheat sheets" for their notes, pictures and quotes about their activists (see Figure 20). On the day of my observation, (Appendix A.8), the students eat a delicious "meal," and then Lisa sets the stage. "After you share who you are, please share a

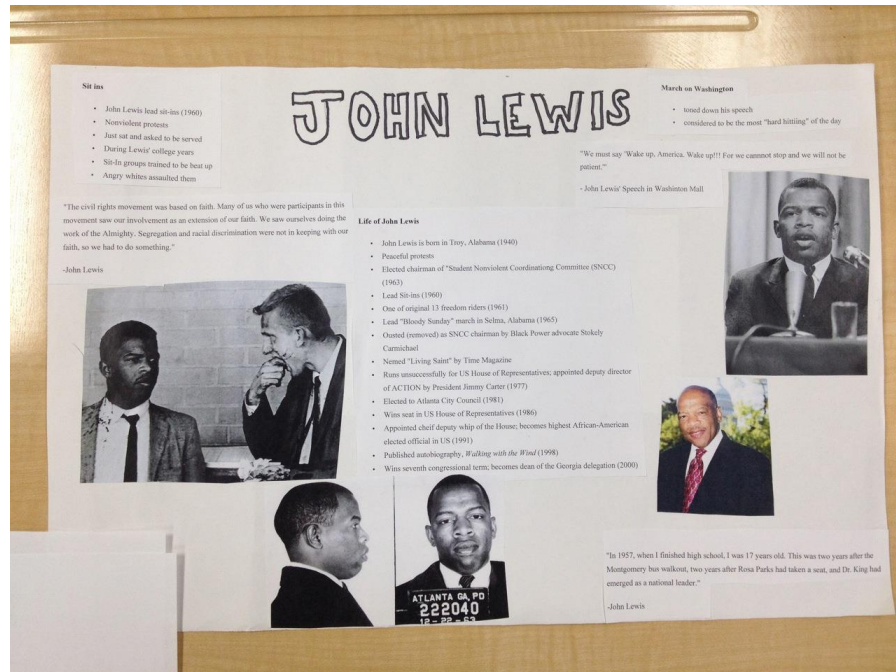


Figure 20. Caesar's Civil Rights Dinner Party placemat for John Lewis

quote that tells us about your person... We want to get to know you.” After all of the activists introduce themselves, Lisa shifts to the next phase of the dinner party. “I hope you listened to your peers. I am going to give the floor to you and you are going to talk as one group. Then, a little later, we will break up into small groups. I would like you to be thinking; “What do you want to know? What connections can you make to each other? What sparks your interest? The floor is yours.” The students took turns asking each other questions such as, “Ms. Eckford, how was school for you?” or “Mr. Evers, what was the reason why you were shot?” Once everyone at the dinner party shared a story or two, Lisa asked the students to break up into smaller groups that had something in common. One student group discussed “forgiveness;” another talked about their military service. The conversations lasted the remainder of the 70-minute period.

This event illustrates how learning and interacting with each other can lead to student autonomy and engagement. As Lisa notes, “They facilitated their own dinner party conversations. It wasn’t me pushing them to talk. If you look at the vector drawing that Marlene

created to track the conversations, you can see that they were all talking to one another. I don't think I even had to talk that much the entire period" (Appendix D.1, 355-56). The dialogue vector drawing reveals that most of the students contribute to the discussion and that the dialogue is spread out evenly among the various participants. They learn from each other and take an interest in the stories they share. During our focus group, when the students reflect on the dinner party, they give it "two thumbs up for engagement!" (Appendix E.3, 90). Terrell says, "That was top tier!" because it "caused discussion and debates" (95). Although later discussions reveals that the dinner party could have been more intellectually challenging, the students suggest that the Civil Rights Dinner Party is a great example of an engaging discussion because "everyone talked."

In contrast, the students share that the "fishbowl" deliberation on the Spanish American War was far from engaging. A fishbowl is a type of discussion during which one group presents and shares information when they sit inside the "fishbowl" circle while the students on the outside of the circle listen carefully and take notes. Then the roles reverse. The fishbowl discussion is Lisa's performance assessment for the unit on imperialism, more specifically, on the Spanish American War. Rather than have a debate between the imperialists and the anti-imperialists, Lisa wants to try a fishbowl deliberation so the students do not focus on a winner or a loser. She wants them to learn about both sides of the imperialism argument and then form opinions about the essential question: "Is war ever justifiable?" This deliberation on the Spanish American War is the first time that Lisa had tried this type of discussion format with her students, and she is anxious about how it would all play out (Appendix D.1).

Lisa assigned her students to one of two groups – the Imperialists or the Anti-Imperialists. The students research and develop their cases for either going to war with Spain or

not going to war with Spain. To prepare the students for the deliberation, Lisa provides them with two-page summaries titled “The Case for Going to War” and “The Case Against Going to War.” In addition, Lisa gives the students a graphic organizer that she adapts from The Choices Program ([www.choices.edu](http://www.choices.edu)), which the students use to take notes from the reading. The students work in their teams as they read the two-page summaries and determine what five to seven “big ideas” best support their case for or against going to war. Lisa gives the students three class periods to work with one another to research and describe the big ideas in their arguments for or against war. On the day I observe (Appendix A.10), Lisa’s class is supposed to hold the deliberation; however, the students use the first 30 minutes to formulate and prioritize their arguments.

While the students appear to be interacting and learning with each other during the research phase of the fishbowl, during the actual fishbowl discussion, each student simply reads his or her “argument” to the other members of the team. There is no real interaction among the inner circle or with those on the outer circle. Caesar notes, “If we could have had a rebuttal, that would have made it so much better” (Appendix E.3, 195). For Pamela, the problem with the fishbowl is that it lacked interactivity. “I think it would have been a lot more interesting if we had been on two panels facing each other. Then, one group, it would be your turn to state your category, and then the other side would have been able to ask us questions right away. So, instead of just having a conversation with our group, it would be both sides facing each other” (Appendix E.3, 198-202).

Caesar and Pamela would have preferred that this discussion had been a debate, hinting that they prefer the back and forth nature that a debate provides versus the passivity of the fishbowl. During the focus group discussion, Caesar states repeatedly, “I wish this was a debate!

I love debates!” (Appendix E.3, 186). Lisa chooses to avoid a debate in this case because “they tend to focus too much on the winner and loser, and then whatever side I have taken is the side that I care about and learn about. There is still a persuasive element to deliberations. You are still trying to convince the other side that you are right. It is just in the set up” (Appendix D.1, 185-187). Pamela realizes that debates are not always the best discussion format: “I totally understand Mrs. Randall not wanting us to have a winner and a loser because she wants us to be informed about both sides” (Appendix E.3, 231-232).

The fishbowl format requires that the inner circle share perspectives on a topic while the outside circle quietly listens and takes notes. However, as Pamela notes, it was hard for the outside group to stay engaged in the conversation because they just had to listen. “They weren’t really involved, they were just typing. They weren’t engaged...I mean in any type of social situation, if you are on the outside, you are not going to be paying attention. You’re trying to pay attention, but you’re really not” (Appendix E.3, 210-211). The students also do not understand why the people on the inside of the circle were just talking to one another. “We had already all had those conversations when we met with our group to prepare,” Marie shared. “But, we went even into more depth in our small group. So we were like repeating everything we had already talked about but it wasn’t even in that much depth when we were in the fishbowl” (Appendix E.3, 214-215). For Jane, the purpose of the fishbowl was basically, “just telling the other group what to write down” (Appendix E.3, 216). Rather than having one group talk and one group listen, the students want more interaction between the two. “It should have been one group versus the other group trying to convince them why they should or shouldn’t go to war” (Appendix E.3, 217-218). In this sense, it is the potential for back and forth interaction, the point/counterpoint nature of the learning, that is far more engaging.

In addition to observing several instances of whole class discussions on subjects like civil rights and imperialism, I also observe many small group collaborations. For example, students work together in small groups to create PowerPoint presentations on progressive reformers, to write newspaper headlines for the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* ruling and to develop plans to change Jim Crow laws regarding who could be served at lunch counters. To support student autonomy, as well as student competency and relatedness, teachers may structure group work with clear, shared expectations and careful attention to group dynamics. Pamela finds working in groups “more engaging...that is why I wrote down social” (Appendix E.3, 10). Scott agrees, but he also notes: “There has to be a purpose to working in a group” (Appendix E.3, 322). Despite the enthusiasm for working in groups, not all students prefer working with others. Note the following exchange from the third focus group about working in groups:

“Working in groups can be good or bad. You get other opinions and someone can say something that you did not think of, and that can be good. But sometimes you have real disagreements with the other people in your group. You know you are right and they are wrong. It can get frustrating.”

“But that is a really important skill to have, right?” Pamela seems to suggest that the students need to learn how to listen to others and weigh different perspectives.

Caesar admits, “When I am in a group with my friends, sometimes we get really off track and we get nothing done.”

“Really, because when I work with my friends, we never get off track,” adds Marie. “Our work always turns out better than when I work with someone who I am not friends with.”

“If it is a really important group project,” says Pamela, “I don’t want to be critical of people I don’t know. You have to build up that strong bond and trust before you can be like, ‘Oh, I don’t like your idea for this or that.’”

“I think teachers really have to put a lot of thought into how they make their groups,” suggests Jane. “Sometimes it is good when you make the groups up randomly. But if we don’t work well with some people, they should not put us with them.”

“Yeah,” Pamela agrees, “but sometimes it is good to challenge us to work with someone we have never worked with before.” (Appendix E.3, 334-352)

As this exchange illustrates, as with discussions, collaborative work can be engaging and autonomy-supportive. However, working in groups is not engaging in and of itself. Students want to feel autonomous working in groups rather than controlled by others or by the limitations of the activity. While most of the focus group students seem to find working in groups with their classmates engaging, group work can also be frustrating. How the teacher chooses the groups, establishes the expectations and purpose of the group work, and sets up the dynamics and logistics of group work, all factor into whether working in groups is engaging or not.

Lisa recognizes the power and appeal of discussions for her students; however, she also admits that they are hard to do well. “I don’t want to be the one who is always talking. That is my personality. Ideally, I get them to the point where they are doing most of the talking. But I need to get them there.” This is a challenge for many teachers who believe that if they provide the content, they know it will be “right.” Class discussions also frequently go off topic or they resort to students sharing opinions without backing them up. Lisa argued, “I want them to use knowledge and facts and details to back up their opinions; statements like ‘well we should have done this or we shouldn’t have done that’ are not helpful unless they can back them up with

evidence. I love their opinions, but they have to be able to support what they say” (Appendix D.1, 413-414).

In addition to balancing teacher and student talk, and pushing students to support their opinions during discussions, Lisa admits that she sometimes struggles with how to respond to challenging or controversial questions and topics. For example, during a discussion on discrimination, one of the students asks: “When did black skin become bad and white skin became good?” This question poses a dilemma for Lisa.

I like to have all of the answers for the kids, and in this case, I did not have the answer.

The conversation continued, and I didn’t get great answers from the students either. I reflected at the time that I spent too much time on this discussion – yet they seemed engaged. Should I have had them stop at that point to discuss strategies for how we can find answers to their question? Should I have tabled it and come back to it when I felt more comfortable? (Appendix D.1, 72-79)

How teachers facilitate “interacting and learning with others,” especially during controversial issues discussions, can either support or thwart student engagement, depending on how students perceive their autonomy (as well as competence and relatedness) in the situation. If the teacher monopolizes the discussion, dismisses students’ questions, or answers them unsatisfactorily, the students will likely disengage. However, if the teacher stops everything to investigate the question, she runs the risk of having students provide unsubstantiated opinions and the learning moment dissipates. Perhaps, the teacher might discuss strategies for going about finding information or solutions to problems or issues. For example, teachers might have their students work in pairs to email local university professors with expertise in race relations, or local NAACP, or the Anti-Defamation League or the Southern Poverty Law Center to find out more



about the origins of modern-day racism. This way, the teacher acknowledges the importance of student questions and sustains the students' autonomy in their learning.

When teachers facilitate opportunities for students to interact and learn with others, they are supporting students' natural propensity to socially construct knowledge (Richardson, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). However, discussions or group work are not necessarily engaging for students. It is the autonomy-supportive features of discussions and group work – the continuous exchange of information, a shared purpose, multiple ideas, everyone is involved, students contributing their own thoughts, but backing them up with evidence – that makes “interacting and learning with others” engaging. Putting these features into practice in the classroom is difficult, as the paucity of purposeful classroom discussions suggests (Parker, 2010 ). I address the potential implications of how students describe and experience engaging discussions for teacher practice and professional development in the final chapter of this paper.

### **Figure It Out**

*My teacher supports my autonomy when I am able to “step in the shoes” of historical figures and try to figure out what they were thinking or why they did what they did. I look at evidence, examine different perspectives on issues and events, and decide for myself what could have or should have happened.*

Deci and Ryan (2000) argue that human beings are innately curious. Lisa's most engaging high school memory is when she was “given paintings to look at, to analyze, and to try to figure out what was going on during that time in history.” In my observations of Lisa's class, I observe several instances where she tries to engage students by sparking their curiosity to “figure

out what is going on.” However, these activities prove to be challenging, both for Lisa and for her students.

During a unit on the Industrial Revolution, the students are learning about workers’ rights. On my observation day (Appendix A.3), Lisa has the students analyze a primary resource titled “With Drops of Blood: The History of the Industrial Workers of the World Has Been Written” by Wm. Haywood. Secretary. Chicago, 1919. In addition, Lisa hands out a graphic organizer that she adapts from the Library of Congress’ Primary Source Analysis Tool. Working alone, each student reads the primary source document and answers the prompts on the graphic organizer. Lisa facilitates a whole class discussion on their findings. The following vignette depicts how I experience this activity. The plain text represents the actual dialogue and observations; the italics represent my thoughts throughout the lesson.

Lisa introduces the activity, the document, and the graphic organizer to the students. Then, she gives them sufficient time to read the four-page document. When the majority of the students turn over their papers, Lisa initiates the discussion.

“Ok, let’s talk about this. What did you first notice?”

“This seemed like a little bit much,” one student shared. “I know that they went on strike and stopped factories from working for days at a time, but this seemed a little extreme.”

Lisa pushed him to think, “What do you mean by extreme?”

He replied simply, “The punishments.” *What makes you say that? Can you point to examples from the text?*

Another student added, “What I noticed is that in the land of the free, these people are being stripped of their freedoms, of their rights.” *What makes you say that? Can you point to examples from the text?*

A different student noted, “I was just awed by how much the police and the ordinary people got away with doing.” *What did they get away with doing? Can you give specific examples from the text to support your point?*

Lisa nodded and said, “Ok, good.” Moving along in the organizer, she asked, “What was small but interesting?”

“I noticed that in the signature line, instead of saying President or CEO or founder, it said secretary.”

“Oh, I know I noticed that too. And whose name was there? Big Bill Haywood!” The students all recognized his name. *What role did Big Bill Haywood play in this document?*

Another student shared, “I was so surprised that they had a headquarters, and buildings. *Why were you surprised?*

“Yeah, me too. They were a legit organization!” another student chimed in. *What makes you say that?*

Lisa asked, “Why do you think this was written?”

“Maybe so they could show the public what was happening to the Wobblies.” *Why would the I.W.W. want the public to know?*

“Good,” Lisa acknowledges. “You know, I didn’t ask this, but where might you see this document?”

“In the newspaper?” one student responds. “Maybe it was sent to the government and leaked to the people?” says another. *What makes you say that?*

“It sounds like the muckrakers!” a different student is trying to connect to an earlier lesson. *What makes you say that?*

After some discussion about possible publication venues, Lisa asks, “Do you think this strategy worked? Do you think it brought about change? What was their goal?”

Pamela notes, “Even if it didn’t get the point across, it showed people in the middle class who weren’t aware this was going on, that maybe they might be able to change their opinion, and that would start to build...” *What was going on? Change whose opinion of what?*

Lisa follows up, “Do you think it was trying to build strength among the people? Do you think it was trying to build their confidence?”

“Maybe not so much that but to bring about awareness,” suggests a student. “We need a plan to fix this! This was not what we are going to do. This was a call to people to say we need to do something. We need to take action!” *What makes you say that?*

Caesar adds, “I don’t know if when people read this document, the door swung wide open, like ‘Oh man this guy is so right,’ but I think that maybe some people who oppose it started to think. What if he is right and I am wrong?” *What makes you say that? Who was right or wrong...about what?*

“Ok, last question. I cannot wait to hear what you say about this one. If this document were written today, how would it be different?”

One student guesses, “It would be more about money?”

“How so?” Lisa asks.

“This didn’t really mention anything about wages...”

Terrell has the final word. “I think it would be spread through social networking. It would probably be more accusatory...like *#Save the Workers!* It would be more about “join us!” (Appendix A.3, 43-148)

During this learning activity, Lisa wants to help her students “figure things out.” They recently learned about Big Bill Haywood and the I.W.W.; this prior knowledge seems to be integral to the students’ inquiry into the document. To help her students form personal connections, Lisa encourages them to consider how this document might look today. This type of an inquiry can be autonomy-supportive when the students are actively searching for clues or connections to what they already know. They respond to the content with their own thoughts, and there are no clear right or wrong answers. The students seem to engage behaviorally as the majority of students were asking and answering questions, and they seem to engage emotionally as their interest level seemed to be high. However, perhaps Lisa could have pushed the students to dig deeper by consistently asking the students, “What makes you say that?” This question, presented in depth in the book *Making Thinking Visible* (Ritchhart et al., 2011) can be weaved into discussions to push the students to give evidence for their assertions. By asking students to share their interpretations backed with evidence, teachers enable the entire learning community to consider multiple viewpoints and perspectives on a topic. The question “What did you see or what do you know that makes you say that?” is not a challenge or a test, but instead demonstrates to students that their teacher is genuinely interested in how the student is constructing his or her understanding of a complex idea or document.

By consistently asking this question, teachers demonstrate that “figuring it out” requires that students go past surface answers and mere opinions; that the “correctness” of an answer

depends on the evidence that supports it. Lisa does quite a bit of prodding, and she seems to have activated her students' curiosity, as they make connections and ask questions about the document. However, it is not clear from this observation if the students know why they are reading this document or if they internalize the reasons for knowing about workers' rights and unionization. Ultimately, as self-determination theory suggests, for students to engage in learning, they need to internalize the meaning or the rationale for doing the work.

Analyzing primary source documents as an activity, therefore, is not necessarily engaging. If the students perceive they are initiating the inquiry and analysis, and if they see the value of the activity, they may feel autonomous. However, if they perceive their teacher is controlling or coercing them to learn the content, or if the inquiry results in the presentation of unsubstantiated opinions, the teacher may thwart his or her students' need for autonomy. Perhaps when introducing the lesson, Lisa could have established a clear purpose for having the students read this particular pamphlet. Throughout my observations, Lisa often asks the students, "How do ordinary people bring about change?" I wonder if Lisa could have directed students back to the purpose of this pamphlet to see if they thought the I.W.W. wanted to bring about change, and if so, how. Could the students have referred to specific parts of the document to illustrate their understanding of the purpose of this document more clearly? Could the students have compared this form of enacting change to other forms of protest throughout history or today? This example of a "figure it out" activity demonstrates that there is a complex and delicate balance between how much the teacher needs to scaffold the learning experience for student competence and how much autonomy she needs to provide for student inquiry.

## Resolving Cognitive Dilemmas

*My teacher supports my autonomy in social studies when she encourages me to wrestle with important historical or current problems or dilemmas. I am able to weigh my options and make decisions based on my values and available evidence.*

In my first meeting with the eighth grade focus group, I ask them why they think they are required to take social studies. Scott says that learning social studies is important because “you learn about how to make decisions and about ethics and stuff” (Appendix E.1, 117-118). Lisa integrates moral and ethical dilemmas and decision making as a thread throughout her course. She wants to teach her students about having a “moral compass” (Appendix C.1). “This is not just about content and knowledge, this is about decision-making and how people make good decisions” (Appendix D.1, 532-534). For Lisa, “It’s about choices, choices that have been made in history” (Appendix C.1, 84-85). Lisa’s students describe this opportunity to make decisions as “impactful,” “interesting,” “important,” and “challenging” (Appendix E.1).

During the first week of school, Lisa introduces her students to the idea of moral and ethical dilemmas. She uses materials developed by the founder and president of the Institute for Global Ethics, Rushworth M. Kidder. The kit includes a DVD and a book called *How Good People Make Tough Choices: Resolving the Dilemmas of Ethical Living*. Below, Lisa describes how she introduces the decision making process to her students.

The first week of school, I show my students three cases. One of the dilemmas is from the Armenian genocide told by a survivor. He tells a story about his parents who were in a room, hiding from soldiers. The baby would not stop crying. The video stops and asks what is the dilemma here? What do you think he is going to choose to do? We discuss.

The man then shares that they had to suffocate the baby. Then, I ask them, “What were

their options? What could they have done differently?” This is hard for them...they insist they should never have killed the baby. They should have all died instead. There are two other dilemmas as well....We talk about the dilemma paradigms: *Truth vs. Loyalty*, *Justice vs. Mercy*, *Short-term vs. Long-Term* and *Individual vs. Community*. We also talk about the core values that guide our decisions: *honesty*, *responsibility*, *respect*, *fairness* and *compassion*. Then, I have the students write their own dilemma paradigms for each of these paradigms and they defend their decisions with the core values. The students keep coming back to these paradigms with each unit. They look at an event in the news or in history and they want to discuss: “What was the dilemma? What paradigm was it? What values did the people use to make their decisions? (Appendix D.1, 479-517)

The dilemma paradigms have made an impact on Lisa’s students. In our first focus group meeting, when I ask the eighth grade students what they find most engaging about social studies, Scott shares, “We watched this video, and a speaker talked about a dilemma that he had. He had two decisions that would play out differently, and had completely different outcomes, and you had to choose between one choice and the other” (Appendix E.1, 76-80). Pamela adds: “There was a baby that was crying and these people were in hiding, and if they killed the baby, everyone would be safe, but if they let the baby live, they might be found and everyone might die” (Appendix E.1, 82-84). Several months after this initial focus group, Caesar argues that to be engaging, learning activities should be ‘impactful.’ He is referring to this same case.

Like when we learned about that man who had to make a decision about whether to risk everyone’s life by letting the crying baby live, or kill the crying baby so that everyone else would live. You think, ‘Wow, how terrible! I cannot imagine having to be in that



position.’ That really impacted me, and it made me remember it until now. (Appendix E.3, 242-243)

When students have to think for themselves, they are acting autonomously. For Scott, learning how to make tough decisions is what he likes most about social studies, “I like learning social studies because you learn from all of the people who had to make all of those hard decisions, and you can think about what you should do or would have done in that situation. I think it is not just learning about history” (Appendix E.1, 125-126). Like Scott, Jane connects learning how others have made important decisions to learning how to make good decisions for herself.

[Mrs. Randall] gives us all the right concepts and then allows us to make our own decisions. She’s related different problems to our own lives and things that have happened to us. I actually find that really interesting because you can decide for yourself. She does not tell us what to think but she brings up ethics and kind of pushes us to make good decisions by using the right tools. (Appendix E.1, 136-141)

Fred Newmann (2010) argues that throughout most of their schooling, students must comply with what teachers and tests require them to do and learn. Teachers rarely ask their students to use their minds to solve meaningful problems or answer challenging questions. Lisa counters Newmann’s claim by presenting her students with ethical and moral dilemmas, both from history and from today’s headlines. Resolving dilemmas means that students have to learn to be comfortable with ambiguity. Terrell refers to this ambiguity as “gray area.” Among a long list of features of engaging learning activities, Terrell lists “gray area.” When I probe a little further on why he finds gray area engaging, he shares:

You know, it is not always clear if something or someone is right or wrong. If you were in someone’s shoes in history, you might have questioned their decisions. It makes you

wonder what would you have done instead. It makes you think. You have to make choices and different choices could take different paths. (Appendix E.3, 99-102)

Lisa's students find ambiguity both challenging and engaging. When asked in the online survey, "How much does your social studies teacher emphasize asking open-ended questions that make you think hard?" most of Lisa's students respond "very much" (Appendix F).

American history is replete with examples of ethical and moral dilemmas. Should the colonies declare independence from England? Should the south secede, and should the north fight a war to prevent them from doing so? Should the U.S. drop the bomb on Hiroshima? What should the role of government be regarding health care, poverty, violence, education, etc.? When faced with these decisions, citizens must ask: What is the dilemma? What are our options? What paradigms does each option address? What values should guide our decisions? How should we decide? What are the potential consequences of those decisions?

When teachers present their students with such complex questions asked throughout history and today, challenge them to weigh potential options, and have them make decisions based on their values and available evidence, they are not only developing effective citizens, but they are also supporting their students' autonomy. The students are not just figuring out what happened in history, but they are actively considering multiple viewpoints and options and making decisions about contested issues. They are forming persuasive arguments and presenting their own views on what could have or should have happened. Students are more likely to internalize the meaning and worth of learning when they view social studies as an ongoing series of decisions made by ordinary or real people rather than a list of fixed and inevitable events (Brophy, 2010; Dewey, 1913).

## Then and Now

*My teacher supports my autonomy by helping me to discover connections between different periods of time, people, places and events. I find meaning in history when I can make connections between historical and current events.*

The task seems simple enough. In groups of three or four, the students are creating brief PowerPoint presentations to teach their classmates why their assigned chapter on the Progressive Era is important. Lisa challenges them to answer the question, “Why do my classmates need to know about my topic or person?” (Appendix A.2, 46-48).

As I travel from group to group, I notice that the students are just pulling facts and images from the chapter to create bullet points for their slides. I do not hear much if any critical discussion of why this person or topic is important. As I jot down “trouble finding importance” in my field notes, I overhear one of Lisa’s more vocal students say, “I think that Mother Jones is important because she is like the Rosa Parks for the Industrial Revolution. They were both brave people who fought against injustice.” “Oh, that’s good,” said her fellow group member. I write down, “Mother Jones – Rosa Parks – A connection!”

Lisa calls the students back to their desks, and she invites the first group up to present. The group’s topic was “The Muckrakers.” As the “speaker” presents his slides, he announces, “We just didn’t think that our chapter was that important” (Appendix A.2, 99-100).

Lisa thinks for a second, and then responds, “What did all of you eat last night?” The presenter ponders the question. “I think I had chicken.” Another student says, “We went to Flip Burger after the game.”

“Ok, great. How do you know that your chicken or your cheeseburger wasn’t made in a slaughterhouse like the ones you just showed us in your presentation?” (OB 3, 109-111). The

students moan “gross!” and “yuck!” One of the students does a quick search on his computer and shares, “Doesn’t the FDA make sure our meat isn’t bad?” “Hmmm.” Lisa responds, “Who do you think made the FDA happen? Do you still think the muckrakers were not important?”

(Appendix A.2, 112-113)

With that, our speaker sighs, “Well, then they should have said that in the chapter!”

(Appendix A.2, 114)

This short anecdote sheds light on the difficulties of helping students understand why social studies content is important. The students pull many facts from the textbook to put into their presentations; however, answering “Why was this person or event important?” is far more challenging. When Lisa asks them, “What did you eat last night?” I can almost hear the students’ brains working. Students want to know why social studies content is important, but they need help identifying the subject’s relevance.

While making connections between ‘then and now’ is critical, will knowing about the muckrakers and the FDA connection help students to appreciate and understand the rest of U.S. History? What happens when students move on to the next unit? WWI, or the Depression, or WWII, or the Cold War, or the Civil Rights Movement? Will Lisa have to help students find ways to personally connect to each individual unit, or are there concepts, themes or questions that are common to all of these units? I wonder what would happen if for each topic or event that the students learn about, the students can ask, “How does this person or event help us to answer this/these larger important question(s)?”

The challenges of helping the students see patterns across time and space is evident in Lisa’s first paper assignment: “Write a five paragraph essay about the Brooklyn Bridge as a metaphor for the Industrial Revolution, just as (*student choice of topic*) is a metaphor for the

Technological Revolution.” Lisa wants her students to compare the Industrial and Technology Revolutions as two examples of revolutions. The students examine revolutions using the Brooklyn Bridge (an innovation from the Industrial Revolution) and an innovation the students choose to represent the Technology Revolution. Lisa wants the students to understand the concept of ‘revolution,’ and to help students make connections between ‘then and now’ (LR, Personal Communication).

Lisa provides the students with clear directions and descriptions of what each paragraph should include. The students write several drafts of their papers, which include one round of peer edits. However, when Lisa reads the final papers, she realizes that rather than focus on these objects as metaphors for revolutions, the students focus on how the two objects are similar or different. They focus on the building of the bridge instead of explaining why it is a metaphor for larger revolutionary changes in society, in the economy, in politics, etc. Several students identify the importance of ‘connections;’ bridges connect different worlds just as social media or technology connect to different worlds. For example, Jane’s opening sentence is: “The Brooklyn Bridge was created to connect Manhattan and Brooklyn just as social media was created to connect people to other people.” Terrell writes: “The bridge that goes farther than any other could, the Internet, is the ultimate connector for the entire world.” Other students focus on the convenience of both the bridge and technology; for example, Pamela writes: “The Brooklyn Bridge has made it easier to live, the same way the touch screen phone has.”

In one of our focus groups, the students mention this paper as an example of how Mrs. Randall helps them to see the big connections over time. When I ask them to explain the relevance or importance of the Industrial Revolution as it relates to the Technology Revolution, Scott comments that he does not think that knowing all of the details about the building of the

bridge is important. Caesar says that he is considering a career in architecture, so he finds all of the research on the bridge “really interesting” (Appendix E.1, 115-116). Terrell notes that some parts of social studies are useful to some people but not others. “I don’t think I am the type of person who needs to know who built the Brooklyn Bridge and that he died by getting his toes crushed!” (Appendix E.1, 107-112). These sample comments suggest that perhaps the students focused on the building of the bridge more than they focused on why the bridge was a metaphor for the Industrial Revolution. The Brooklyn Bridge and technology (e.g. the digital camera, Internet, touch screen, iPhone 6, etc.) are not necessarily “revolutionary objects” to be compared as similar or different. Rather, both are symbols of larger revolution. Their comparison begs the question: Why are the Industrial Revolution and the Technology Revolution in fact *revolutions*?

What is the take-away from this assignment? Is there a thread that ties together the Industrial Revolution with the Technology Revolution? Why do students think they wrote this paper? It appears that the concept of revolution gets lost in most of the papers. If the big idea is “revolutions” and what makes something a revolution, Lisa might start with a concept attainment exercise to help students develop a working definition of revolutions. She might start by asking students to explain why the American Revolution was or was not a revolution. Then, she might ask students to explain why the Civil War was or was not a revolution. As Lisa provides examples from the past and present, the students begin to develop definitions of revolutions. The students’ can refer to these definitions every time they enter a new era. For example, was the Progressive Era a revolution? Was the New Deal a revolution? Was the Civil Rights Movement a revolution? As students explore the concept of “revolution,” they might also consider “What is the difference between revolution and social change or rebellion?” or “Are revolutions good or

bad for society?” Once students have building blocks for a “definition” of revolutions, they can apply it to other periods and begin to look for patterns of revolutions across time and place.

In addition to exploring big idea concepts such as revolution (or democracy or freedom or justice) to help students find connections across time and place, Lisa also uses essential questions. Essential questions are open-ended and thought-provoking questions that students may continuously examine to understand and develop meanings about key ideas (McTighe & Wiggins, 2005). For example, during the unit on civil rights, Lisa poses the following essential question: “How might ordinary people bring about changes in power?” For the unit on the Spanish American War and Imperialism, Lisa asks, “Is war ever justifiable?” Persistent questions like these can stimulate student thinking and inquiry about the content under study. By repeatedly returning to these questions throughout a course, teachers can help students strengthen and deepen their understanding of why they are learning social studies. Consider Scott’s response to what he learned about the Civil Rights Movement:

I kind of think differently about the Civil Rights Movement because I think that you can’t really make a law to change how people think. Learning about Emmett Till and all of those other people, it sort of just told me that this whole movement was about changing the way people think and maybe not really just about changing the government.

(Appendix E.2, 99-103)

Scott formed his own essential question: “How can we change the way other people think?” He seems to have internalized the meaning of the Civil Rights Movement.

Developing a rationale for learning social studies content is essential for student autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, conveying a rationale for learning social studies can be challenging, especially if teachers rely on using “then and now” connections for each unit. As

Lisa shares, “I think that the whole idea of imperialism is so foreign to them. They don’t know that we used to go out and take countries, and that other powers did the same...I didn’t make enough connections here. I think I made some but not enough” (Appendix D.1, 449-454).

Understandably, Lisa finds it easier to help students connect personally to the civil rights unit than to the unit on the Spanish American War. Lisa defines “making connections” as helping her students relate to and find personal relevance in the content. In another example, Lisa explains, “When we get to prohibition, we think about why do I need to know about this, but then we talk about drugs and the legalization of marijuana” (Appendix C.1, 193-196). Individual and isolated connections might help students see the influence of the muckrakers in FDA laws today, or that people immigrate and migrate for many of the same reasons today. However, these connections might provide isolated and fleeting “a-ha” moments.

In contrast, when teachers and their students return to key concepts or big ideas continually throughout a course or even over many years, they encourage students to form relationships with the content (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). These concepts and questions become the threads that tie the units or chapters together and provide purpose to their learning. Understanding how potentially disparate pieces of content and information connect to larger themes, big ideas and timeless questions appears to be integral for student autonomy in social studies learning. I return to this argument in my final chapter.

**Value Beyond the Classroom.** *My teacher supports my autonomy by showing me the “real world” value and utility of learning social studies and by encouraging me to present what I have learned to an authentic audience.*



The following vignette from Lisa's Civil Rights Movement unit illustrates how Lisa helps her students discover the value of learning social studies (Appendix A.7).

The guest speaker is a Gateway parent. Introducing himself with a warm "Hello friend!" to each of the kids, he walks to the white board and in blue dry erase pen writes two words: "Black Male." "What do these words make you think?" Silence. "Are you afraid to offend me?" The students slowly begin to call out words like "thug" and "gang."

"Do these words describe Mr. B?" (Gateway social studies teacher). "Do these words describe Coach W?" (Gateway PE teacher). "So why is it that we can come up with this negative description of black males so fast?"

The students call out: "The news?" "The media?" "The movies?" Jane shares that the application called *Vine* often posts videos that mock African Americans and other minorities and makes them look bad. "A lot of kids think they are funny."

Our speaker nods. "Yes, there is a script. That script was written a long time ago, but the script still exists."

He pulls up the first slide on his PowerPoint. We see a 1915 promotional poster for the movie "Birth of a Nation." After narrating the plot of the movie, he ends with, "The script is set; these dangerous black men need to be stopped."

"Fast forward to Emmett Till," says our speaker. The next slide is a beautiful picture of Emmett Till. Our speaker then shows an image of Emmett's face when authorities discovered his body. He describes the dramatic stories of Till's beating and murder, of Mamie Till's bravery in having an open casket funeral, and of Mose Wright, Emmett's uncle, who bravely identified the two killers sitting in the courtroom. Our speaker explains to the kids why this event was so important for turning around the hearts and minds of so many across our country.

His next slide depicts the faces of three young men named Michael Schwerner, James Cheney and Andrew Goodman. With graphic detail, our speaker narrates a story of the tragic fates of these young men. He explains that this event sparked a united struggle against wrong – black and white. Yet, he reminds the students that the script that depicts black men as dangerous continues today.

The last slide is a photo of Treyvon Martin. “What did we learn about Treyvon in the days and weeks following his death. He was a bad boy, he smoked marijuana, skipped classes, got kicked out of school. Yet, his killer knew none of this when he killed him. We need to ‘take out’ the dangerous and scary ‘black thug’ becomes the justification for killing.”

The speaker then makes the conversation personal. “I worry that this justification continues today. I worry that my son, a black male who sometimes wears a hoodie over his big hair, might be seen one day as a threat.” He tells the kids a story about a young girl who ran away from his son out of fear. “You all know my son. He is a great kid. He does really well in school. He is not a threat to anyone. He is not a thug. But the script for the African American male continues.” “This is a father’s plea. It is your job to push back. You can change attitudes. You can change my son’s life.”

With that, he turns to the board and writes the letter “n” with five spaces next to it. “I hear that some of you might be hearing or perhaps saying this word in the halls here at school. I am assuming you all know what word this is. Words have power. This word is likely the last word that Emmett Till heard as his captives murdered him. It was most likely the last word that hundreds of blacks who were killed in the name of hatred and discrimination heard as they were about to die. Imagine saying ‘Hello friend!’ vs. “Hello n-----!” It changes the relationship, doesn’t it? We are trying to change relationships here. The “n”-word is deadly – literally!”

The emotion in the room was palpable. The speaker made history personal and real, and the students felt it.

I meet with the 8th grade focus group later that day. They are still discussing the guest speaker as they walk in the room. Since the speaker is a Gateway parent, several of the students know his son. They feel touched by how personal this story is for him. They also identify where racism seeps into their own lives.

Caesar shares that he is uncomfortable with what seems like a double standard on racism. “One thing I hear a lot is like a black person will say something like the ‘n’ word or something that is offensive toward black people, and he’ll say ‘Well that is not racist because I am actually a black person.’ I don’t think that is right. Just because you might not feel the same way as other people feel, it doesn’t mean that other people will not be hurt by it” (Appendix E.2, 83-86). Jane sees many racist videos on the app called *Vine*, but until today, she thought they were funny. “Not everyone sees it like we saw it today. Like if you make a comment on Vine that’s racist, they will just say oh we were just joking...Instead of finding that funny, I think it’s mean, and I am going to block them” (Appendix E.2, 111-115). The speaker opened the students’ eyes to a new perspective on a mindset they often brush off as “normal.” They attached their own experiences to this presentation and felt a sense of agency in doing something about changing things for the better. The speaker seems to have activated their sense of autonomy by giving them a meaningful rationale for learning about history and by giving them control over the future.

Scott appreciates the way the speaker put all of them at ease and made the conversation about relationships. “I really like how he was changing the tone, and I think that is probably how we can help too is to just change the tone. And I don’t think he was there just to change our

thinking on what those terms meant, but I think he wanted just to try to change the tone to a friendly tone” (Appendix E.2, 41-43). Racism is not just something they learn about in the past; the speaker connects the past to the present, and the students see their place in that story. He activates their desire to do something, and he challenges them to think about how they can be the change. The students recognize that history is not a predetermined set of events, that they can do something to change the script of history.

This type of learning seems to me to be a powerful example of supporting students' autonomy. The speaker asks students to consider their role in history, and he shows them, in a very personal way, how they can be agents for change. The students' decisions would be autonomous, not because he tells them or coerces them into doing something, but because he sparks their sense of agency and self-determination. Jane says that she plans to reject racist Vine posts, and Pamela shares that she learned that “change has to start somewhere, and why not have it be us...it is kind of like this no place for hate thing. If we can get our whole school, that is a lot of people. Why not add more and that can make a big difference just in our community” (Appendix E.2, 53-55).

Creating authentic, real-world experiences like these for her students is exactly how Lisa defines her role as a social studies teacher. Issues stemming from kids saying the “n” word are the impetus for Lisa to teach the Civil Rights Movement far sooner than it lands chronologically in the school year.

I based a lot of his presentation on the ‘n’ word, which they can relate to, which most of them have said. He showed them why you can’t say the ‘n’ word. It was not that you can’t say it because I said so, it was you can’t say it because of all of this. He gave them a

reason why. I am not going to talk at you, which is what we all tend to do...And let me tell you, they will never forget this man and his message (Appendix D.1, 285-294).

Providing experiences like these for students is challenging, especially when personal connections are not as evident. However, teachers may start by answering questions such as “Why do my students need to understand this content?” and “How will they use this understanding in the real world?” (Newmann, 1992, Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). When students can see how they can use and apply what they are learning in the real world, they are far more likely to engage in that learning. I address the implications for real world learning experiences on student engagement in the final chapter.

### **Competence-Supportive Instructional Practices and Qualities of Learning Activities**

While Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that autonomy is *the* key factor in determining whether or not the students will engage in learning, students engage in and value only those learning activities they believe they can master (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). For students to adopt extrinsic, as opposed to intrinsic, learning goals, they need to feel that they can be successful in pursuit of those goals. They will be more likely to pursue and internalize external goals (i.e. teacher’s learning goals) if they understand those goals and they know how to succeed in pursuing those goals. Therefore, supporting students’ perceptions that they can be successful or competent is integral to student engagement in learning activities.

Decades of empirical research using self-determination theory suggest that teachers can support students’ needs to feel competent by introducing learning activities that are “optimally challenging,” thereby allowing students to push themselves to expand their “academic capabilities” (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010; Niemic & Ryan, 2009). When teachers set high

expectations, they demonstrate to students that they are confident students can be successful with higher levels of work. Not only can teachers provide high expectations, they can also provide clear expectations in the form of learning goals and explicit directions. In addition, when teachers provide modeling and scaffolding, students feel supported in their learning. Frequent and constructive feedback, as opposed to evaluative and norm-based feedback, can also help students track their own progress toward mastery. Finally, when teachers encourage students to reflect on their work, identify their own strengths and struggles, and plan for addressing those struggles, they encourage student accountability for their own successes or setbacks. In this section, I describe how students perceive their ability to be successful in Lisa's classroom and discuss how Lisa supports or hinders these perceptions.

### **Challenge Me**

The students in the eighth grade focus group identify “challenging” as one of the key factors of “engaging learning activities” (Appendix E.3). However, Caesar qualifies that the challenge must also be “possible.” “Well, first I put down *challenging*, but then I wrote down *possible* after that. It's good when it is challenging, but not so challenging that you want to give up soon” (Appendix E.3, 42-43). Two of the students note on the online survey that when they have been bored in Lisa's class, it is because the work was not challenging enough or their teacher did not challenge them to think (Appendix F, Q5). One student notes that the reason for his or her boredom is that the work is too difficult. Finding a balance between “not too easy” and “not too hard” may be difficult for teachers who have students with varying levels of readiness and approaches to learning. However, level of difficulty does not necessarily equate to level of challenge.

For the students in the eighth grade focus group, optimal challenge appears to mean higher levels as opposed to lower levels of thinking. For example, when material is repetitive, as Marie notes is the case with much of the civil rights content, or when students are simply collecting and sharing information, as Jane notes is the case with finding the facts and creating the placemats for the Civil Rights Dinner Party, the students report that they do not feel challenged. However, when Lisa asks them to make connections with other activists during the dinner party or to think about questions such as “What makes change possible?” (Civil Rights Movement), or “Is war justifiable?” (Spanish American War), the students feel more challenged. In fact, the students seem to appreciate the opportunity to look for patterns. The most engaging aspect of the Civil Rights Dinner Party is finding the patterns and connections among the various activists. “I think [the dinner party was challenging] because you had to make those connections with all of the other dinner party people. If you went far enough, you could make some type of connection with everyone” (Appendix E.3, 124-126).

### **Be Clear About What You Want Me to Know and Do**

Even the most intrinsically motivated students become discouraged if they do not know what they are expected to do. While Lisa’s students reveal that they know what she expects of them, in their comments in the online survey, several students note that Lisa’s directions are not always clear. “My teacher gives clear directions on assignments, but sometimes they aren’t super clear. She always explains them further than what is on the sheet” (Online survey). Commenting on the Power Point presentations on the Industrial Revolution, Caesar notes, “[Mrs. Randall wants] to make sure that we know it, and if you don’t know it, she can help you understand it.

She's really good because she makes sure that you know what you have to do" (Appendix E.1, 219-220).

One way that Lisa might further support her students' competence is to clearly establish the learning outcomes and describe the final assessment to students at the beginning of the unit, as Lisa did with her Civil Rights Dinner Party. In addition, when introducing learning activities to students, teachers should let them know up front what knowledge and skills they expect students to master and how they plan to assess their learning. One way to insure that the students know what to expect is to provide rubrics at the beginning of each unit. For major projects, Lisa provides the students with rubrics before they begin so they know, in advance, how she will assess them (Appendix C.1).

In addition to being clear about learning outcomes, teachers should also explain the purpose of each activity. In many cases, teachers do not share the purpose of activities with their students, so the students do not understand the rationale for learning. For example, in one activity, Lisa provides groups of students with a 6-paragraph essay on *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, and she asks each group to come up with a headline for their group's assigned paragraph on a small erasable white board. She wants the students to string the headlines together to help them understand the meaning and importance of the case. Although the students do exactly what Lisa asks them to do, they do not see the big picture as Lisa had intended. Pamela notes,

I think it was a great idea in theory, but it didn't execute well...Summarizing the paragraphs in one sentence was pretty helpful because usually she has us write a little amount, which I get because you want to be...wait there is a quote for this, oh yeah it is "be simple but significant." So, that definitely helped me to take something that was a



little larger and make it more simple and something more significant (Appendix E.3, 296-300).

Pamela and the other students in the focus group give a “thumbs down” to this activity for engagement and learning. They do not understand that the purpose of the activity was to dig deep into understanding this important court case. Instead, Pamela thinks the purpose of the activity was learning how to summarize. When teachers provide clear learning objectives and explain the purpose and rationale for learning activities, they support their students’ competence because students do not have to guess what they need to do to be successful.

### **Show Me How to Be Successful**

Even when students feel challenged and understand the rationale for learning, if they are not sure of how to proceed, they might still feel incompetent. Teachers can support their students’ needs for competence by demonstrating what success looks like and by providing structured guidance, such as modeling how to read a textbook paragraph for understanding, pressing students to clarify their comments or providing graphic organizers to help students visualize content and their ideas. On many occasions, I observe Lisa modeling quality work for her students. For example, before the students present their Power Points on their Progressive Era chapters, Lisa demonstrates what good presentations should look and sound like. She models where the presenter should stand, what types and how much information should be on the slides, what to do with his or her hands, and how to engage the audience. “Be proud of your work. Don’t apologize... You can read your slides, but don’t just read it word for word. We can read” (Appendix A.2, 73-76)

Lisa recognizes that she has to model just about everything she expects the students to do, from analyzing political cartoons to taking Cornell Notes to conducting research for a project. In my conversations with the students, they acknowledge and appreciate her efforts. “Whenever I have a question about something, or something I don’t understand or think what about this,” shares Caesar, “She’ll answer it to the fullest extent and give you all the knowledge you need to get what is important into your head” (Appendix E.1, 196-198). Jane adds that Mrs. Randall “teaches the subject in a way so students, at all different levels, understand it thoroughly” (Appendix E.1, 33-34).

Lisa acknowledges that she has “some kids who really struggle to speak and have some tremendous executive functioning issues” (Appendix D.1, 315-316). Since not all students learn the same thing in the same way, Lisa tries to focus on the students’ learning styles (Appendix C.1). One way that Lisa differentiates her lessons is by establishing different roles during cooperative learning. For example, during small group work, students may choose among the jobs of scribe, editor, speaker, and researcher. She also provides graphic organizers for note taking and for pre-writing. Teachers may provide guidance to those students who struggle with auditory learning by using visual structuring. For example, Lisa might keep track of students’ contributions or conceptual attainment during classroom discussions on the white board or use the Promethean Board to post central or unifying images for the lesson.

Teachers can also support their students’ needs for competence by demonstrating the skills necessary for success, such as searching databases for information for research projects, analyzing political cartoons, presenting a Power Point, or actively listening during a deliberation. When planning units and learning activities, teachers may determine exactly what knowledge and skills the students will require, and then plan for modeling and scaffolding those skills with

which the students might struggle. When students know what they have to do and they know how to do it, they are far more likely to engage in learning.

### **Give Me Frequent & Constructive Feedback Instead of Just Evaluative Feedback**

For students to feel competent, they need to know how they are proceeding toward mastery. Teachers can support this need by providing frequent and constructive feedback. This feedback can come in many forms, including student-teacher conferences, emails to students, commentary on tests or papers, peer edits and conferencing on papers, and formative assessments. When I first interview Lisa, she is just returning from a professional development seminar on formative and summative assessment.

We talked about formative and summative assessments, and they gave us great examples like “The Four Corners,” “The Ticket Out or Exit Ticket,” The Ticket In,” you know, on what was covered yesterday....we also talked a lot about commentary. I write a lot of commentary on what I give back to them. What is the point of assessing? What do they get out of it? What do they learn from it? Most importantly, what do you learn about them and what they have learned and what can you do differently? (Appendix C.1, 262-269)

Lisa’s summary of her professional development class speaks to the heart of the importance of constructive feedback for student competency. The purpose of constructive feedback, especially in the form of formative assessments, is to inform both the teacher and the students about how the students are progressing, what is working and what adjustments need to be made. This type of feedback is for collecting information about the learning rather than to evaluate or judge the students’ performance. Feedback is essential for student improvement; however, if teachers do

not consistently integrate feedback into planning, they can forget this step in competency support.

In Lisa's classroom, I observe many types of feedback, including asking students questions to clarify their answers, observations of students during learning activities, and quick checks of student work. While these strategies can be effective, Lisa shares that she often misses students' misconceptions in their learning if she is just observing (LR, Reflection II). In addition, some students shy away from answering questions in front of their classmates, and evaluating student work can come too late in the lesson to make any changes to the students' learning process. Lisa shares that she uses different strategies to collect information on students learning (personal communication). For example, when the students work in groups, she often has them use erasable white boards or large Post-It easel pads to track their work, which she then posts around the room. She also has the students summarize what they learn in their unit Google Doc, which serves as both a note taking folder and a way for Lisa to track her students' learning.

Lisa also uses entrance and exit tickets to get feedback on what her students are learning. Following an assembly with Ambassador Andrew Young, Lisa asks her students to write exit tickets to Andrew Young (Appendix A.5). "What notes would you have left him?" She ask the students to write on a note card: Andrew Young taught me...(I..., to..., that..., how...). She then reads out some of the cards anonymously to the class:

He taught me that I am a leader

To not be afraid of death and not to be tempted by money

To stand up for what you believe in

To see differences and individuality

In another example, Lisa gives the kids a short “quiz” on index cards to see what they learned about World War I thus far in the unit. “You can write 3-4 sentences about what we learned about yesterday. Summarize the big ideas from your notes” (Appendix D.1, 365-367). Lisa’s goal in giving the students this “quiz” is not to give students a grade, but rather for Lisa to see what students learned, or did not learn, and for the students to gauge their understanding (LR, personal communication).

On the online survey, most of the students either strongly agree or agree that Lisa provides helpful feedback. When asked if Lisa values the students’ effort and improvement, the majority of students answer, “Strongly agree.” Marie notes that “[Mrs. Randall] cares about our opinion and gives helpful feedback on assignments/comments to better our understanding of the topic” (Appendix E.1, 25-26).

Because the intention of these types of assessments is to inform, teachers must use them frequently, target specific learning outcomes, and deliver them without increasing student anxiety. In many cases, rather than use formative assessments, Lisa has informal conferences with the students to discuss learning challenges. Regardless of the form that feedback takes in the classroom, it is essential to student perceptions of competency that they know throughout the learning process how they are progressing toward mastery. When teachers focus on students mastering content instead of providing grades, comparative performance or tests, and they emphasize frequent and constructive feedback; students can focus on learning and improvement (Dweck, 2006). When students focus on learning rather than just on earning a good grade, or avoiding a bad grade, they are more likely to engage in challenging work. Feedback supports student competency because students know how they are progressing and they have opportunities to make adjustments...before it is too late.

### **Encourage Me to Reflect on My Learning and My Progress**

Teachers may encourage students to reflect frequently on their learning, to self-assess what learning strategies work or do not work, and develop personal plans for self-improvement. As John Dewey (1910) argued, “We do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience” (p. 78). Lisa uses reflections both for students to find personal connections to content and for students to track their own competence and progress toward mastery. The purpose of the former is to support student autonomy; the purpose of the latter is to support their competence.

For example, a few days before Lisa gave the students a test on World War I, she has the learning specialist come to her classroom to discuss potential study strategies. The students share how they planned to study, and the school’s learning specialist and Lisa press the students to consider how they might shift their study strategies; from passive reading through notes to more “active” study strategies, such as creating their own tests, and writing short answer responses. After the test, Lisa asks the students to reflect on what they did to study for the test, what worked, what did not, what they plan to do differently next time and what they still do not understand. Reflections like this help students identify how they learn best and how to take accountability for their learning. The reflections also help Lisa identify how to help those students who do not have the study or learning strategies they need to be successful.

When teachers have students reflect on their learning, whether the learning includes taking a test, writing a paper, completing a project, or interacting in some way with the content, the students demonstrate, to the teacher and to themselves, what they have learned from that experience. The students take accountability for their learning, and they can be proactive about how to proceed. In this sense, reflections are critical for supporting student competency, and

autonomy, because they help students identify for themselves what they need to do to be successful.

### **Relatedness-Supportive Instructional Practices and Qualities of Learning Activities**

Students need to feel autonomous and competent before they will engage in learning activities. Yet, the primary reason why students engage studies learning activities is that someone with whom they feel connected (e.g. a parent, a teacher, a peer group) values that learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Thus, the foundation for encouraging students to engage in learning is providing them with a sense of belonging, or *relatedness*, to the person or group who is trying to get them interested in learning. In classrooms, this means that students need to feel respected and cared for by their teacher and other students. This warmth and caring is essential for students to be willing to engage in classroom learning and activities.

### **Show Me that You Care About Me**

When students think that their teachers care about them, they are more willing to engage in the difficult work that accompanies real understanding (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Noddings, 2005). Perhaps even more than supporting the students' autonomy or competency, Lisa wants her students to know that she cares for and respects them. "I try to go to at least one of their games or events because I want them to see that I care about them not just as learners, but also as human beings" (Appendix C.1, 337-340). Students often just wander in to Lisa's classroom at lunch to "hang out," and former students, whether in high school or adult, frequently stop by for a visit. When parents at the school heard that Lisa was working with me on a research project,

they were eager to share with me, “Oh, she was my child’s most favorite teacher at this school!” It is the care that Lisa showed her students that parents remember.

In addition to showing an interest in her students outside of the classroom, Lisa makes her students feel at ease in her classroom. She greets the students as they walk in the classroom and she compliments them when they come to class prepared. On a few occasions, when a lesson is not going as Lisa planned, she does not hesitate to ask the students for their feedback, either in a class discussion or as an online survey. For example, when the students complain about writing daily entries in their blogs, Lisa switches to Google Docs, which the students seem to prefer. She also admits to the students when she makes a mistake, like when she misspells words or forgets to post a homework assignment. These are just some examples of how Lisa shows her students that she cares about them.

The eighth grade students in my focus group seem to know that Lisa cares about them. One student comments anonymously in the online survey: “I have always gotten clear feedback and constantly feel that my teacher cares about me and my education. She expresses how proud she is when I do well in sports and in school, which shows how well she knows me as a person and a student” (Appendix F, Q5). Terrell shares, “She makes me feel successful because of the advice she gives, and if you get something wrong she never gets mad. She just helps you” (Appendix E.1, 30-31). Similarly, Marie notes, “She cares about our opinion and gives helpful feedback on assignments/comments to better our understanding of the topic” (Appendix E.1, 25-26). In our first focus group, Scott shares, “She’ll push you to be your best and she won’t give up on you” (Appendix E.1, 23). In the online survey, most of the students respond that they “strongly agree” that “my teacher cares about me” and that “I feel respected in this class” (Appendix F, Q5 & 6). While these findings are far from scientific and represent a very small



percentage of Lisa's students, they do reveal that at least the students in the focus group value a teacher who cares about them and encourages them to do their best.

### **Help Me Feel Safe and Respected in Your Classroom**

In addition to showing the students that she cares about them, Lisa also wants the students to feel safe to take on challenging work in her classroom. As Lisa shares in her interview, "I work very hard on creating a culture of safety in my classroom throughout the year so that students feel free to share their thoughts, opinions, and especially their fears" (Appendix C.1). To create that culture of safety, Lisa finds ways to ease her students' stress levels in her classroom. She does not give pop quizzes any more because they cause too much stress. When preparing students to write a longer research paper, Lisa provides the structure and the resources they need so that the students do not feel overwhelmed by the process. She wants the students to be successful, and she is willing to make accommodations to decrease external and evaluative pressures that might interfere with their learning.

Another way that Lisa creates a culture of safety is by encouraging the students to trust one another. Often, Lisa will select two students to organize the small groups, or she will assign students as leaders of groups who might never otherwise step up to the task. After one observation during which students prepare in groups for a deliberation on the Spanish American War (Appendix A.10), Lisa has the students evaluate themselves as group members on criteria such as *stayed on task*, *listened to other opinions*, and *made thoughtful contributions*. She also asks each person to anonymously rate their group members on the same criteria. When Lisa notes that some students are consistently receiving poor evaluations from their group members, she arranges conferences with these students to discuss what they can do differently to contribute

to the group. After another observation, Lisa asks the students to email their group members to mention something they had done during their group work. Here are some examples of student emails (LR, email communication):

- “I think you did really well today because you brought a totally different perspective on our topics today. You also had some really amazing points.”
- “You did well today because you asked a lot of questions, and that’s a good thing because it means you were thinking.”
- “You worked hard today, using your time efficiently and effectively to help contribute to our group’s discussions. You moved our conversations along and helped the group stay focused. Keep up the good work!”
- “You did a great job participating in the discussion today and I thought the points that you made about our topic were really valuable.”

Lisa takes her role as a warm and caring teacher seriously. “I want my students to feel respected, by me and by their classmates. If they respect me and like me, I will know it, in and out of the classroom” (Appendix C.1, 336-337). Lisa supports her students’ needs for relatedness by taking an interest in their lives, and by creating a safe space in her classroom where students can take risks, speak up, and feel connected to others.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 4, my aim has been to share my experiences of student engagement in Lisa’s classroom with my readers and to illustrate instances of how Lisa fosters student engagement by supporting student perceptions of their autonomy, competency, and relatedness in her classroom. In doing so, I address my secondary research question: How might social studies teachers

support students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness? In Chapter 5, I explore this question further as I present evidence of autonomy, competence and relatedness-supportive learning contexts in Emmett Blackwell's eleventh grade classroom. My aim for Chapter 5, as with Chapter 4, is to interpret experiences of student engagement in learning activities in their natural classroom contexts, transform the world of student engagement into a series of representations, and to make those experiences visible for my readers. In Chapter 6, I draw on both cases and on my findings of autonomy-, competence-, and relatedness-supportive learning contexts to address my primary research question: "How might social studies/history teachers promote and sustain their students' emotional, cognitive and behavioral engagement in learning activities?"

## **CHAPTER 5: ELEVENTH GRADE CASE RESULTS**

*The world's more interesting if you know all this stuff, so let me help you figure it out.*

~ Emmett Blackwell, eleventh grade American Studies History Teacher, The Gateway School

In Chapter 4, I present evidence of autonomy, competence and relatedness-supportive learning contexts in Lisa Randall's first period eighth grade social studies classroom. In Chapter 5, I explore autonomy, competence and relatedness-supportive learning contexts in Emmett Blackwell's (a.k.a. Dr. B's) seventh period eleventh grade American Studies History classroom. As with Chapter 4, I draw on my observations of teaching and learning in Emmett's classroom, student work samples, interviews with Emmett, transcripts of focus group meetings with the six students who comprised my eleventh grade focus group, and Emmett's reflections on the vignettes that I wrote based on my field notes and observation transcripts.

### Getting to Know Emmett

Emmett Blackwell is a Caucasian male in his early 50s. He has been teaching history at The Gateway School for 17 years. Before teaching at The Gateway School, Emmett taught history at a southeastern community college. Emmett has both an undergraduate and a master's degree in history, and he received his Ph.D. in American Culture Studies. When Emmett first came to Gateway, he did not envision having a career as a high school teacher; this would be a temporary assignment while he completed his dissertation. However, by the time he had received his doctoral degree, he thought, "I liked it so much here, that I was not interested in looking for alternative settings. I came here not with the perception or really much of the training to be a high school teacher...I had to learn along the way" (Appendix C.2, 9-13). At The Gateway School, Emmett teaches 11<sup>th</sup> grade American Studies History, Advanced Placement U.S. History and several elective classes including History of Pop Music and Perspectives on the Vietnam War. I constructed the following portrait vignette of Emmett from my interview on September 23, 2014 and from other conversations that took place from October 2014 to February 2015.

*I am a history guy, much more so than a social studies guy. I never really found other social science subjects like political science or economics very interesting. I just don't have any personal connection to those subjects. I feel lucky to be able to teach American Studies History at Gateway. Many of my colleagues at other high schools have to be a social studies "jack-of-all-trades." I can't think of doing anything that well as far as being a social studies teacher except for something connected to American culture. I am very passionate about what I teach, but I think I am also pretty organized. You have to be organized when you are teaching young people history.*

*Everything I do in my class is connected to the idea of 'How do you understand American culture?' For me, the whole point of the discipline is to understand how cultures work. If you're*

*going to understand American culture, you need to know about American history and how and why things got to be the way they are. I think that U.S. history is also important because it prepares young people to be future citizens and to be involved in politics. Politicians are always quick to utilize historical examples and sometimes they are not very honest about it. To me, history is all about giving the kids the ability to decode what is going on around them.*

*My fundamental goal in American Studies History is for my students to develop a sense of curiosity about the world around them, and to really think about what makes a culture work and where does a culture come from. Ideally, they would get that about American culture in this class, but they would apply that curiosity to a global perspective and in how they live their lives. Whether they are following current events or politics, or interacting with people in the workplace, whatever they do, they would be curious and willing to think about stuff. To get my students to be curious and ask questions throughout their lives would be more than any teacher could ask for.*

*The philosophy here at Gateway is to draw the kids into learning rather than to pull them*



Figure 19. Emmett's classroom.

*or push them. That is a big difference in what I see between here and a lot of other schools and the way I grew up in high school. It was always about having to do well in school and get good grades. But, here at Gateway, it is more like, "The world's more interesting if you know all this stuff, so let me help you figure it out."*

Emmett Blackwell is a historian and an anthropologist; he is passionate about the study of American culture. As a history educator,

Emmett wants his students to be passionate about American culture and to engage in the art of “doing history.”

### **The Setting: Emmett’s Classroom**

Upon entering Emmett’s classroom for the first time, I had no doubt that I was in an American History classroom. A huge map of the United States hangs in the corner; to the right is a wall-sized white board, which is busy with red, blue and black notes that guide Emmett’s students through the day’s lesson. In the upper right-hand corner of that board are the homework assignments for Emmett’s three different classes. Windows with a view of the courtyard stretch across the back of the room. Another long white board and a Promethean Board



Figure 20: Images of Americana

share the front of the room; Emmett’s L-shaped desk sits in the front-right corner. Emmett’s room is like a brochure for an American culture museum; donning the walls are campaign posters and election pins, old license plates, comic books from the 1940s, a 1926 almanac, paintings depicting the western frontier, record album covers, a Ben Franklin figurine, flags and bunting among many other items. Tucked away in the corner is an old fashioned phonograph. Populating the middle of the classroom are four round desks surrounded by six to seven chairs each. Emmett’s classroom is tight before the kids even enter; when all 20 students come in with overloaded backpacks, it is a challenge to move freely. During my observations, I sat in a small chair with an attached desk, which looked like it must have once occupied a 19<sup>th</sup> century one-roomed schoolhouse; a huge authentic cotton scale from the 1800s loomed over my head. Emmett is clearly passionate about American culture!

### **The Eleventh Grade Focus Group**

Over the course of my time at The Gateway School (April 2014 – March 2015), I met with six girls, whom I refer to as my “eleventh grade focus group.” Their names (student-selected pseudonyms) are: Nicole, Christie, Melinda, Sol, Emma and Beth. Initially, two other girls and one boy signed the forms to join the focus group, but due to logistical challenges, they were unable to make it to our focus group meetings. The six girls and I met three times over the course of four months, either in the commons area of the school’s library or outside in the courtyard during lunch. Each meeting lasted approximately 40 minutes. As with the eighth grade focus group, I did not collect any demographic information from the students. However, during our focus groups, the six girls identified themselves as belonging to various races and ethnicities.

While the eleventh grade focus group lacked a male perspective on engagement in 11<sup>th</sup> grade American Studies History, the girls represented many different perspectives on student engagement. They were open and forthright, and they described, in their own words, their needs for autonomy, competency and relatedness. The following portrait vignette illustrates what I heard them say about how and why they engage, or do not engage, in learning history.

If you want to engage us in learning history, please do not give us a textbook that has a font size of .6...with no pictures, nothing bolded, nothing highlighted (Appendix E.4, Beth, 22-23). We want teachers who use humor and who don’t only tell us facts...but tell us stories...and then discuss them with us (Appendix E.4, 17). Speaking of discussion, it would be really cool to have discussions about ‘why do you think this happened?’ or ‘what would you do in this situation?’ and ‘what do you think about this or that?’ (Appendix E.5, 207-208). It is great when our teacher uses open-ended questions that make us think.

We really like it when *we get to read different perspectives...and look at history from different perspectives from the people who lived then* (Appendix E.6, 110).

However, we need time to read and think about documents that are difficult or challenging. When the material is difficult, it really helps when the teacher can talk it through and explain it to us. Not only does the *teacher have to know what they are talking about and really know their field, but also it is so important that they are passionate about it* (Appendix E.4, 142).

We also like *simulations and games* that help us to learn the subject and help us remember. We engage in learning history when the teacher balances *teaching us information and giving us projects* to do on our own. The purpose of *projects should not be for us to teach ourselves about important content*; instead, teachers should use projects to say, *ok, you have learned this information, now so what?* (Appendix E.4, 111-112).

We learn from teachers who *help us look and think differently about the way I look at the world* (Appendix E.1, 125) and *when you can apply what you are learning in the real world* (Appendix E.1, 195).

The students' voices, presented throughout Chapter 5, speak clearly about how young 16 and 17 year-old-students experience social studies learning activities. I return to the students' perceptions of engagement throughout the rest of the chapter as I strive to make visible what social studies learning looks like when classroom contexts support, or hinder, student engagement. The remainder of this chapter addresses my secondary research question: How might social studies teachers support their students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness in the classroom?



## **Autonomy-Supportive Instructional Contexts**

### **Catch My Attention**

*My teacher supports my autonomy by sparking my attention and interest in an activity that is fun or unusual, involves movement, or ignites an emotional response.*

Emmett finds that “doing a lot of different things and doing a lot of smaller things” (Appendix C.2, 114) can engage his students and catch their attention. I observe Emmett take the kids outside for an interactive timeline activity, play a Hawaiian song on an old-fashioned record player, show a black and white movie from the 1930s to depict southern poverty, and dedicate a class period to learning vocabulary words from the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, the day before the students took the PSAT.

One of the more consistent ways that Emmett catches his students’ attention is to use “fun facts” throughout his lectures to get the students interested in a topic. When teaching the students about the settlement of New France, Emmett shares “Here’s a fun fact kids. Does anyone know who settled Detroit? Antoine de Cadillac! Folks if you know your history, the whole world makes more sense!” (Appendix B.2, 29-30). By the expressions on the students’ faces, I can see that they enjoy Emmett’s “fun facts.” In fact, when the students present Power Points on the American colonies, they include their own fun facts. By integrating fun facts, the students actively seek out and integrate into their presentations what they found, and what they thought their classmates would find, is most interesting or important to know about their colonies (Appendix B.1).

In addition to incorporating fun facts throughout his lectures, Emmett likes to grab students’ attention by posting a “series of images for the kids that correspond with whatever we do” (Appendix C.2, 119). For example, when the students are reading the *Autobiography of*

*Benjamin Franklin*, Emmett projects an image on the Promethean Board of a cartoon of Ben Franklin. When beginning the unit on the American Revolution, Emmett posts an image of a bloodied George Washington, and when introducing the idea of westward expansion, he posts an interactive map of the 13 colonies morphing into the 50 states. For almost every class I observe, Emmett posts a relevant image on the Promethean Board.

At times, Emmett asks students to think about the images on the Promethean Board, but during other observations, Emmett does not integrate the images into the day's discussion. In one of our focus groups, Nicole notes that it would help to have "different ways to visualize it [history] other than just words or just a picture on the board, which is generally what we use" (Appendix E.5, 220-221).

During one of my early observations of Emmett's classroom, after wrapping up a lecture on colonial life, in the last 15 minutes of class, Emmett presents the students with an old-fashioned slide

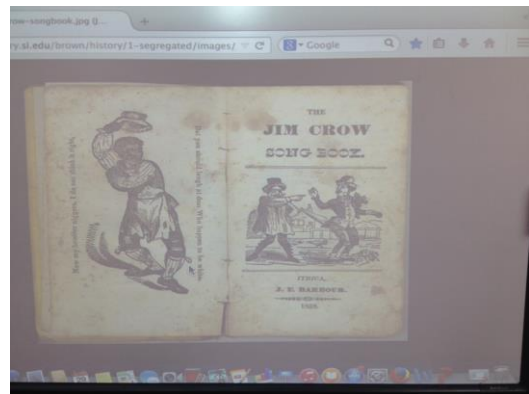


Figure 21. Emmett displays images on the Promethean Board.

show of famous 20<sup>th</sup> century paintings and sculptures. I notice that several students cannot see the images, and there does not appear to be a clear connection between the images and the American colonies. In an interview with Emmett after class, he acknowledges, "This was just an utterly unengaged class during the second half. It just seemed like nobody, or maybe a couple of kids, were into what we were doing and nobody else seemed to care that much. Maybe it is because we had started it a couple of times and had not finished it" (Appendix C.2, 77). Art can be a powerful vehicle for catching students' attention and sparking emotional responses to the content (Ritchhart, et al., 2011). However, Emmett reflected that his students were not engaged

by this particular art history lesson. Emmett considers potential reasons why his students did not engage in this lesson, including a lack of understanding about the purpose of the exercise, the connection between the art slide show and the lesson on American colonies, or perhaps that the students simply could not see the art from where they were sitting. Regardless of the reason for the disengagement, Emmett recognizes that presenting pictures of interesting artwork does not necessarily catch students' attention.

In addition to using images, Emmett catches his students' attention by letting "the students take charge of the class like we did last week with the colonies presentations" (Appendix C.2, 115-116). During this class, Emmett assigns groups of four students to research one of the 13 original colonies. The students work together to develop Power Point presentations that convey information about their assigned colonies. For example, the Maryland group shares information like who settled Maryland and when, what crops they grew, and what was the Acts of Toleration. At the end of their Power Point, the presenters ask their classmates to open up a cell phone app called "Kahoot.it" to take an interactive quiz.

The students enjoy the presentation and the fun interactive quiz. However, as Emmett points out later, "In some ways that worked and in some ways it didn't" (Appendix C.2, 116). This strategy catches students' attention with technology, creating slides, finding their own "fun facts," and taking an interactive quiz on their phones, and the students pay attention to their classmates during the presentations. However, as Emmett notes, the activity seems to fall short in that the students present primarily surface level information, much of which is incorrect. Emmett has to continually correct the students and push them to consider why learning about each colony is important, a task which they seem unprepared to do. Emmett's intention is to have the students do something different and fun, a change of pace from whole class lectures; however, he

expresses his frustration that the presentations are not more accurate or compelling. In this activity, Emmett catches his students' attention and supports their autonomy by encouraging them to develop their own lessons to teach their classmates, but insuring that the material students share is accurate, relevant, and important can be difficult to do. I address how Emmett supports his students' needs for competency later in this chapter.

The girls in the eleventh grade focus group also list games and simulations as a way to engage them in learning history. However, when I ask for examples, they take me back to middle school. Several of the girls discuss with fond memories the assembly line simulation from Lisa's eighth grade class. Nicole explains that games should be both fun and educational. "When we were in 8th grade history, we had a project where we were learning about the Gilded Age. It was like a game that we played over the course of a few weeks. We talked about different investment opportunities that would be better about the time period, and I learned so much from that one game" (Appendix E.4, 41-45). Later, Nicole notes, "I don't really think you can separate learning from enjoying. I think when it is a lesson we enjoy, I think it is a lesson that we gain knowledge from" (Appendix E.4, 174-175). Research consistently demonstrates that games and simulations can catch students' attention and spark emotional responses to social studies learning (Clegg, 1991; VanSickle, 1978). By integrating learning activities that are fun or new, social studies teachers can catch their students' attention and provide the emotional sparks necessary for engaging students in more cognitive learning experiences (Ryan & Deci, 2002).

### **Allow me to respond personally**

*My teacher supports my autonomy by allowing me to express my own opinions or perspectives during learning activities.*

Emmett can relate to his students' need to find personal connections in their learning. "When I had to teach other social studies topics like economics and political science...I just didn't have any personal relation to it" (Appendix C.2, 42-43). Just as Emmett prefers not to teach subjects to which he has no personal connection, Emmett's students seek out ways to find personal connections to American Studies History content. For the students in the eleventh grade focus group, sharing opinions and perspectives on issues is essential to supporting their autonomy and thus their engagement in learning activities.

Nicole shares that both lecture-based and project-based classes can fail to engage her if she does not see how the content relates to her personally. "If you have too much of just you finding the information on your own, or if you just have someone telling you that information, there is a disconnect there, the information just becomes a series of facts rather than something that you can relate to and figure out on your own terms" (Appendix E.4, 49-53). Nicole reveals that she learns history best when she can connect the content to her own values or experiences. To help her form these personal connections, Nicole shares that "it would help to have discussions, or different ways to visualize history...that would make it more personal to us and help us connect it back to ourselves" (Appendix E.5, 221-224). By encouraging students to discuss their perspectives or opinions on history content, teachers can support their students' autonomy and foster personal connections to the content.

While Nicole does not engage in learning when she has to teach herself through projects, Beth finds projects engaging because she enjoys exploring topics on her own. Speaking of her World History class, which was primarily project-based, Beth shares, "What I found with my friends is either you love it or you hate it [project-based learning]. I have some friends who said it was the worst class they had ever taken. But, I loved the class. I thought it was the best class I

had ever taken. I loved the projects, even though there were nights when I was up until 2am dying, but I still loved it” (Appendix E.4, 101-105). Projects provide one way for students to respond personally to history content. However, as Nicole notes, not all students embrace the autonomy of having to teach themselves content.

The way that our teacher taught last year was just projects. The majority of what I learned last year was stuff that I looked up either in the book or online. But [this year] I like that even when we were just learning about early America with the Spanish coming over and the English and the French, Dr. B did a really good job of teaching it to us and telling us...to make it a story and not just a list of facts. When writing my notes, I would write down in language that made sense to me...He made it very accessible so I could interpret it into my own mental capacity. (Appendix E.4, 87-96)

Nicole responds personally to the content because Emmett makes each lecture a story, and she is able to “interpret it” in a way that she can personally relate. Nicole reveals that while some students connect to content through independent projects, other students connect personally to history when their teachers convey history as a story. Just as students in language arts class may find personal meaning in the stories they read, Nicole is able to respond personally to Emmett’s stories about history by interpreting them in ways that make sense to her.

Encouraging students to respond personally to historical content can be challenging because much of the social studies or history curriculum does not clearly connect to the everyday lives of adolescents. When personal connections are not clear, how might history teachers help students develop their own personal connections to the content? One way that Emmett encourages his students to connect personally to the content is through historical literature. In eleventh grade American Studies History, the students read *The Autobiography of Benjamin*

*Franklin* in the fall, and *Ragged Dick*, a Horatio Alger story, in the spring. Emmett encourages his students to develop personal connections by providing opportunities for them to respond to the readings and by asking them what they think it all means. “I especially like how we discuss our own views on it and its application to what does this mean for us today,” shares Melinda. “And its not just what we do in class, we are not just explaining what happened in the book but why that was written or what he is actually saying...inferring things about Benjamin Franklin from things that he doesn’t actually say” (Appendix E.4, 81-82).

When I ask the eleventh grade focus group girls how Dr. B might help them develop personal connections to the Benjamin Franklin book, Sol suggests, “In the part of the book that we read recently, Benjamin Franklin wanted to start his little cult. I think it would be fun if we got into groups and started our own societies and we made our own rules...” (Appendix E.4, 134-135). The focus group lights up with Sol’s recommendation, “Do you think Dr. B would let us do something like that?” “That is such a great idea!” It is clear to me that the girls are eager to find personal connections to Ben Franklin, although they admit that the book is difficult to read and the connections to American culture are not always clear. Questions like, “What makes Ben Franklin’s story more or less *American* than your family’s story?” or “Would you have wanted to be Ben Franklin’s friend?” could help students respond personally to books that might otherwise feel a little “disconnected” (Appendix E.5, 167).

Another way that Emmett helps his students to develop personal connections to American history content is by asking them to respond to the content in writing or during discussions. Emmett often asks students to read a section of the textbook for homework and decide what they think is most interesting and/or important. When Emmett encourages his students to respond personally to assigned readings and historical topics, he is supporting the students’ autonomy and

engaging them more than if he had them outline the chapter or answer standardized questions. Emmett challenges the students to explain why they selected those facts as interesting or important and has them generate one or two questions that come to mind when reading the text. By explicitly asking students to share their opinions and perspectives on what happened in history, and by challenging students to ask questions about what happened and why, history teachers may help their students form personal connections to content that might not otherwise be easily relatable.

### **Choices**

*I am able to choose what or whom I learn about, with whom I work, how I learn best, and how I can demonstrate what I have learned. I am in control of my learning.*

Closely related to the concept of personal response is the ability to choose what and how one learns. Emmett supports his students' need for choice in several ways. He lets them choose where they want to sit and with whom. He also lets them choose if they want to work alone or in groups during classroom activities. Because Emmett realizes that sometimes "the person who is most engaged is the one sitting in the back of the room not saying anything" (Appendix C.2, 214-215), he gives students in his class the choice of whether or not to participate in classroom discussions. In addition, when students take tests for Emmett, he lets them choose from a variety of free response questions. The students appreciate being able to choose among these questions and they welcome the fact that Emmett's questions are open-ended. When discussing one of the choices of free response questions on the Colonial America test (Is geography the single most influential factor in the success of the New World?), Emma shares:



Well, my answer was completely different from everyone else's. I said it wasn't because it was too extreme for me to be like this is the single most influential factor. So, I said no. I felt comfortable answering it because he made the question so there wasn't a definite right or wrong answer, and as long as you could back up your opinion with specific examples you got the points. (Appendix E.5, 125-128)

The ability to choose among several free response questions on tests also supports students' need to feel competent. I examine how teachers can support students' competence later in this chapter.

Emmett also gives students choices of what to investigate in larger writing projects. For the junior year research project, Emmett encourages the students to select their own topics. The assignment is to research "an aspect of American culture that reflects their personal interests" (Document, 100 Years Project). The idea is for the students to select an idea, pastime, place, technology, etc. and study this topic over a time span of 100 years. "The goal is for the student to use his or her project as a method through which to answer the larger question of "How did the United States change during the century?" (Appendix G.4). The students select three topics for which they have a "genuine interest and passion," and then Emmett helps them select the topic that is both appealing and appropriate for such a research project. The final project is a 7-10 pages typed, double-spaced paper, and students are required to use an assortment of primary and secondary sources, as well as print and electronic mediums to earn a satisfactory grade (Appendix G.4). Emmett recalls that in years past, the students could demonstrate their understanding of change over time via a variety of products, but now, the teachers feel pressure to have students write more research papers.

In another writing "project," Emmett has his students analyze slave narratives commissioned and written as part of a WPA project during the 1930s. He encourages the

students to sift through several narratives and select three they find interesting (Appendix B.7). By allowing the students to choose which narratives to read and analyze, Emmett encourages his students to direct their own learning experiences and thus experience more autonomy. I observed the classes during which the students first began reading the narratives and when they presented their findings. The majority of students appear to engage in the lesson behaviorally (they are on task, asking Emmett questions, completing their work), emotionally (they seem interested and enthusiastic), and cognitively (they interrogate the content and ask thoughtful questions). On the day the students present, they take ownership over their stories, and they are eager to share their unique findings with Dr. B and with their classmates.

Although Emmett refers to both of these writing assignments as “projects,” the students do not equate writing assignments with projects. Instead, the students describe projects as opportunities to make choices about what topics they learn about *and* what methods they use to present what they have learned. Nicole explains that while she likes writing because she is better at writing than doing projects, “It would be cool to do a multimedia project like making a poster, or a video or a song or a collage – those types of projects could really make you look an event in a different way. I wish that we could look at it in terms of words versus how else can you approach a situation” (Appendix E.4, 123-127). She wishes that she could choose the format of the 100 Years Project because it would have been much more fun to bring in ice cream than write about it!

Projects can be appealing to students because they allow for choice and self-directed learning; however, they can be very challenging to implement. Emmett shares why he is often hesitant to assign projects:

Just thinking about what I am comfortable doing and what I have done successfully in the past, projects are weird...I have kids doing projects in my elective classes all the time. As far as big projects for juniors in American Studies, every few years I do something. But I am not that into them. I find it hard to evaluate them. If you do individual projects, you use so much time doing that, and then if you have group projects, you have the controversy over whether everyone contributed equally. It is tricky. They have opportunities for collaborative learning in different [subject] areas, and I have always felt it is not something that I am really good at organizing and supervising. I did one [project] where the kids had to make comics about the Mexican War. It was very laid out like how many panels they had to have and they had to tell the story of an event in like six installments or something like that. The kids who were good at art liked that project, but some of the kids were miserable. We wound up spending like two weeks on something that I normally do in like three days. I think there is more encouragement for teachers to be doing projects. I am not sure that the higher up you get in school the less helpful doing a lot of projects really is (Appendix D.6, 54 - 78).

Emmett's views on projects speak to many of the challenges that teachers have in implementing project-based learning in social studies classrooms. Research on project-based learning suggests that projects should encourage students to tackle realistic problems that align with their interests (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Hung, 2008). Projects should give students increased control over topics and presentation, and they should provide both structured group work and individual accountability. Teachers should provide students with multiple opportunities to receive feedback, review their work and make revisions. Final assessments should allow for authentic experiences that reflect professional practice and encourage students to present to

audiences other than the teacher and his/her classmates. When teachers present projects as integral, rather than as “extras,” to the curriculum, research demonstrates that students are more engaged in their learning (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Hung, 2008).

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to elaborate on the merits, best practices and challenges of project-based learning. However, the students in the eleventh grade focus group make it clear that doing projects (not all of the time, but on occasion and when appropriate) can engage them in learning history. To support students’ autonomy, projects should provide students with choices of what and how to present, and frequent opportunities to receive feedback to review and revise their work. When students tackle realistic problems that interest them, they have more control over what and how they learn and how they demonstrate what they learn. Emmett is uncomfortable with assigning projects because they take too much time to complete, they are more challenging to evaluate because learning is more subjective, and it is difficult to balance the group work with individual contributions. Many teachers likely relate to Emmett’s concerns. At the heart of project-based learning are choices – choice of problem to resolve, choice of approach, and choice of presentation. If teachers remove the element of choice from projects, they remove the opportunity for students to experience autonomy, and thus engage in their learning.

### **Interacting and Learning with Others**

*My teacher supports my autonomy when she provides opportunities for us to interact and learn with each other. I am able to share my opinions and have others respond to me in an interactive exchange of ideas.*

Like the eighth grade students, the eleventh grade focus group frequently mentions discussions as a way to engage them in social studies learning. Nicole describes her favorite social studies class as discussion-based. “It was never just a teacher talking to me, or at me, telling me information. It was never just me finding information in a textbook or online. It was a discussion; that is why I wrote down discussion-based learning. It’s really important to me” (Appendix E.4, 48-49). When I ask the girls how they prefer to learn social studies, they all mention “discussion-based learning” (Appendix E.4). The girls are quick, however, to differentiate between discussions and “real discussions.” Melinda explains, “I feel like if you are having a real discussion, a lot of people are very good at staying on topic...you get to relate things and you get to hear everyone’s opinion on it” (Appendix E.6, 207-208). Nicole also notes the importance of “relating to things” and hearing “everyone’s opinion” during a real discussion.

...Real discussion is a situation where everyone gets a chance to talk. Maybe it is because our class is so big, or maybe it is because some people are much more comfortable raising their hands and answering questions than others, or maybe there are some people who are just able to answer questions more quickly than others...so often Dr. B asks us a question and only a couple of people answer. I don’t consider that a real discussion.

(Appendix E.6, 210-215)

Melinda and Nicole describe real discussions as interactions during which “everyone talks.” Students want to hear from their classmates, and they want every student to “get a chance to talk.”

When I share the focus group’s comments about discussions with Emmett, he acknowledges that he finds facilitating good discussions difficult.

You know this is a large class and it's at the end of the day. Some of these kids are pretty quiet. A few [students] want to respond to everything, and a few are just more timid.

Every once in a while, I'll go up to someone who doesn't talk a lot and ask, "What do you think about this?" I will try to bring people in...I know that is something I could do better as a teacher is to get everybody sucked into things. At the same time, the people who are really quiet and don't say anything; sometimes their written work is so insightful and so perceptive. I look at it like some people are just quiet and I shouldn't try to force them into speaking out more than they are comfortable (Appendix D.6, 132 - 141).

Emmett, like Nicole, suggests that "real discussions" are difficult in 7<sup>th</sup> period American Studies History for many reasons – too many students in a class (the average class size at The Gateway School is 14 and 7<sup>th</sup> period has 19), the classroom is too small, some students are "quiet" or reluctant to participate, and other students are quicker to respond. He wants to "bring people in" but he does not want to push students to feel uncomfortable. For some students, however, reluctance to participate in discussions may not be because they are "quiet" or "timid," but because that they are just not prepared to answer Emmett's questions or they are afraid to be wrong. Sol admits, "When he asks us questions, I take some time to process the question and take time to organize my thoughts and how I want to say the answer. I try to get it as accurate as possible because sometimes I question myself and wonder if this is right" (Appendix E.5, 60-63). By the time many students have prepared their answers, their teacher has moved on in his or her lecture and the opportunity to interact and learn with others dissipates (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005).

Hess (2010) argues that many people conflate discussions with other forms of classroom talk such as lectures and recitations. In their article, "Teaching with and for discussion," Parker

and Hess (2001) describe discussion as a “text-based, shared inquiry of the listening-and-talking kind. A group of inquirers is presented with a well-chosen text (document, issue, etc.), a focusing question, and a purpose” (p. 275). When discussions move beyond teacher lecture paired with Q & A, “discussion widens the scope of any individual's understanding of a text by building into that understanding the interpretations and life experiences of others. Shared inquiry results, therefore, in shared understanding” (Parker & Hess, 2001, p. 275). Thus, the focus of the discussion becomes “shared understanding” rather than individual students answering the teacher’s questions. Emmett references the potential of “text-based, shared inquiry of the listening-and-talking kind” when he describes his class discussions of the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*.

Maybe there it was more of a democratic type of situation because everyone was reading the same book and they had the same level of knowledge and understanding. So, when we would discuss things like whether or not Ben Franklin was a symbol for America or a model for the American Dream, anyone who wanted to could have been involved in that.

(Appendix D.6, 125-129)

In this example, Emmett presents the students with a text – *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, a central question – “Was Ben Franklin a model for the American Dream?” and a purpose – understanding the concept of the American Dream. Emmett describes the discussion as “democratic” because everyone read the book and everyone had “the same level of knowledge.”

To facilitate these types of interactive exchanges in which “everyone” participates, Nicole suggests, “splitting up into small groups will help everyone’s opportunity to speak” (Appendix E.6, 217-220). Emma agrees. “I think that the discussions depend on how comfortable you are with everything. I know a lot of people are more comfortable discussing

their opinions when it is a smaller group because there are not a lot of people judging their answers” (Appendix E.6, 253-255). Emma points out that students needed to feel safe and free from judgment before they will engage in classroom discussions. This sense of relatedness or need to belong is critical for students to interact and learn with each other. For example, although Beth “loves class discussions,” she shares that she is just not always comfortable participating in discussions.

I just get really squirmy. I don’t really feel comfortable. That might just be me because I am weird, but in my English class, there are only eight people, and we have class discussions a lot. I don’t know why but I just feel so much more comfortable in that class. Maybe it is because it is a smaller group of people. So maybe going into smaller groups would be good, but it is also for the teacher to know that everyone is good...(Appendix E.6, 225-230).

The fact that students need to feel comfortable and safe before they will engage in classroom activities – “for the teacher to know that everyone is good” – speaks to the importance of supporting students’ need for relatedness or belonging. I address the concept of relatedness, a key component in students’ motivation to engage in learning, later in this chapter.

In addition to needing to feel comfortable during classroom discussions, the focus group students also mention the need for controversy to spark good discussions. Christie shares that she enjoyed debating with her classmates in her World History class.

Last year, she split the class into two, and one side had to defend Christopher Columbus and what he did and the other side had to defend why he was wrong. In American History, it is not similar to last year because there really isn’t a debate. If we have discussions, it’s usually on big topics. If we are having a discussion around slavery, no



one is going to argue that slavery was good...I guess in World History there were more opportunities to agree or disagree with your classmates...In American History, it's like we are all on one side. (Appendix E.6, 246-251)

Christie raises an important point when teachers consider facilitating “real discussions” – the presence of controversial content and the ability to look at topics from multiple perspectives. For Christie, there are many controversial issues in World History, while in American History, “we are all on one side.” The presence of controversy and the ability to “agree or disagree with your classmates” supports student autonomy; the students have to think for themselves and direct their own learning, and they have to resolve ambiguities by interacting and learning with others.

As a historian, Emmett recognizes that much of historical study is about wrestling with ambiguity; he wants his students to wrestle with historical ambiguity as well.

Ideally, you have some kind of a moral issue or a choice where you are picking between two things and letting the students talk about it. Here in this class, what I ultimately want to do is talk about “Was Reconstruction justice, or was it revenge?” To me, the ultimate discussion would be kids debating something but then backing up their opinions with the stuff they have learned through class. (Appendix D.6, 101-107)

By posing open-ended questions that do not have a necessarily right or wrong answer, Emmett hopes to engage his students thinking and talking about the content. He wants them to develop their perspectives on important questions using the content or text, and then to support their opinions with evidence.

Sometimes I will set the kids up during a homework assignment. I'll give them a question like, “Is this guy a hero or a villain?” Or, “Was this event harmful or helpful to the

country?” I just give them something where there is a choice and there is not a clear right answer. And then I just sort of let it go from there. (Appendix D.6, 109-113)

Thus, a critical element of interacting and learning with others is posing open-ended questions for which there is not a clear or right answer. Later in this chapter, I address “resolving cognitive ambiguity” as a strategy for engaging students in learning.

Beth also notes that teachers should pay careful attention to the topic when planning for discussions. “Telling high schoolers to get into a small group to discuss something that is like totally irrelevant to their lives is really tough. I am sometimes like that. [Teachers will say] ok, talk to your table about something and we will all just start talking about something else” (Appendix E.6, 232-235). Thus, it is not enough to provide students with opportunities to collaborate and interact in small groups. To capitalize on the potential of discussion to engage students in learning, teachers may organize discussions around provocative questions or topics. I address how teachers might accomplish this in the sections called *Then and Now* and *Value Beyond the Classroom* later in this chapter.

Social studies teachers can support their students’ need to feel autonomous in their learning by providing opportunities for students to interact with and learn from one another. Educators have long understood the benefits of “collaborative learning,” the idea that “shared inquiry” supports the students’ need for autonomy and refocuses the rationale for collaboration from “because students like working with their friends” to “because discussions and interactions expand individual’s understanding through shared inquiry” (Parker & Hess, 2001, p. 275). Research supports the fact that Emmett is not alone in finding that facilitating good discussions is difficult (Hess, 2010; Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Sullivan, Schewe, Juckett, & Stevens,

2015). Yet, as the focus group students convey, teaching *with* and *for* discussion in social studies classroom is clearly a strategy that can engage students in learning history (Hess, 2010).

### **Figure it Out**

*My teacher supports my autonomy when I am able to “step in the shoes” of historical figures and try to figure out what they were thinking or why they did what they did. I look at evidence, examine different perspectives on issues and events, and decide for myself what could have or should have happened.*

The following snapshot vignette depicts a lesson during which Emmett engages his students in a primary document analysis activity. Emmett’s goal is to help his students figure out the U.S. attitudes toward the concept of “manifest destiny” in the months and years leading up to the Mexican War (Appendix B.4). Emmett’s students have been looking at the concept of “manifest destiny,” and their homework assignment was to read about the Mexican War in their textbook. The question for that class is: “Did President Polk want to go to war with Mexico? Yes or no?” The majority of the students raise their hands to vote ‘no,’ but Emmett wants to know what makes them say ‘no!’

*“Let’s say that Mark is Mexico, and I am the army (Emmett is pushing on Mark). Is that a move of peace or is that a move of provocation? This is a big deal. To question stuff like this is not being un-American or un-patriotic. That is just what you have to do when you look at history. You have to look at the facts you are given and ask, ‘What’s really going on here?’”*

*Emmett distributes to each student a packet containing five different historical documents dealing with the Mexican War. He tells the students they can work together or by themselves, but he wants each student to read the documents and do the following: 1) Figure out what you are*

looking at. 2) Figure out where the person is coming from with respect to manifest destiny. 3) Highlight or underline two quotes that you think are representative of each document. 4) Determine what you can learn about people's attitudes about manifest destiny during the 1840s. 5) Is what you are reading true?

*"Guys, let's start looking at these things. They are cool and interesting!"*

*Emmett circulates around the room checking on the students' progress. They are taking longer to read the documents than he anticipated. After about 15 minutes, Emmett asks the students: "Ok kids, who is Mr. Parrot? What do you think his job is?"*

*Steven shares, "He's a spy. He's reporting to the U.S. Secretary of State."*

*Emmett has the students identify the date of the letter, and then pushes them to think. "So we read in our textbooks, "President Polk needs to send the army down," but if President Polk has been spying on Mexico for months and months before that, that is not something that should be overlooked."*

*After a few more student comments, Emmett moves to the next resource, a letter from John Black, U.S. counsel to Mexico. "What does it seem that this guy Black is getting at?"*

*Mary notes, "Isn't he saying that Mexico could declare war on the U.S., that they could threaten us?"*

*"Good. So what are these two guys basically telling Washington, DC?"*

*Back to Steven, "Mexico is inferior and we need to attack them."*

*Emmett agrees, "Yeah, they are pretty much saying we can pull this off if we want to."*

*Moving on to the third document, Emmett asks, "Does anyone want to tell us what is going on in the world of Senator Hannegan?" Emmett soon realizes that perhaps they have not had time to read the document, so he gives them a few more minutes to finish reading the*

*excerpt. Five minutes later, they seem better prepared. Emmett asks, “So how does this guy feel about manifest destiny?”*

*Several students yell out, “He loves it!”*

*“Yeah, let’s go to war even if we all get killed. That is far more preferable than not going to war,” Emmett pushes them again. “That is pretty strong language. It should make you think what is up with this guy? What does this tell you about people’s attitudes during this time period?”*

*Vanessa shares, “He seems like he is really aggressive and that he is believing in manifest destiny. He’s going to put that above people’s lives. It is more important to gain more land than to lose American citizens.”*

*“Very good point, Vanessa. He’s saying literally the sky’s the limit.”*

*With a few minutes left in the class period, Emmett asks the students, “Is doing stuff like this better than using your history book?” Several of the students called out “yes!” but then Nicole shares, “These are a little hard to read.” Several other students at her table agreed. Another student suggests, “It’s better for this part because there wasn’t a lot of this in the book. It gives you a different perspective.” The students enjoy the chance to look at different perspectives, to go outside the textbook. However, when Emmett asks the students if they would enjoy looking at historical documents “all the time,” almost in unison, the students waved their heads side to side in the negative. Offering an alternative, Emmett asks, “What if we were to do this once a week or so?” The majority of the students nodded their heads as if to say, “Sure.” Yet, Nicole came back to the point she made earlier. “The problem is sometimes these are a little hard to comprehend. The language is a little different. It is hard to know what they are getting at. So, it’s hard to understand” (Appendix B.4). By her classmates’ reactions, Nicole seems to*

*be speaking for the group. Although she acknowledges it is “very helpful to talk about it in class afterward,” Nicole’s frustration signals her need for competency support. Emmett acknowledges Nicole’s frustration, but encourages her to persevere. “You know thinking it is not always that clear, I would totally agree with you. But, isn’t that the way the real world is? You know part of this is just reading the stuff and trying to figure it out rather than a textbook that is just going to tell you stuff and then you try to remember it for a test” (Appendix B.4, 42-305).*

In this activity, Emmett encourages his students to try to *figure out* U.S. attitudes toward Mexico leading up to the Mexican War. He wants them to think beyond the limited textbook description of events, to examine primary source documents, “to look at the facts you are given and ask, ‘What’s really going on here?’” (Appendix B.4, 377). Emmett’s goal for teaching American History Studies is “to instill curiosity” (Appendix C.2, 57), to give the kids “the ability to decode what is going on around them” (Appendix C.2, 54-55). He is interested in how his students come to understand and approach answering important questions from history, “especially since there is usually not a right or a wrong answer. There is always a spectrum of answers” (Appendix C.2, 30-31).

Figuring out what may have happened in the past by piecing together information and interrogating primary source documents can be engaging for the eleventh grade focus group students. Referring to the Mexican War primary source document activity, Christie shares, “I really like it when we get to read different perspectives like those. I like it when we can look at history from different perspectives from the people who lived there” (Appendix E.6, 9-11). Beth stresses the importance of trying to figure things out. “What makes [history] so different is, we may know some things, but none of us were there...I think it is hard to teach because there are a lot of conspiracies and a lot of different interpretations of what actually happened. Like we will

never know what happened at Roanoke why all of the settlers went missing. I just think it is important to stress that” (Appendix E.6, 97-99). When teachers ask their students to “step in the shoes” of historical figures to look at history from multiple perspectives, they support students’ autonomy because they are involving students in interpreting history and inviting them to figure out for themselves what might have or could have happened. Emma elaborates on how Dr. B helps his students to interpret history from multiple perspectives.

In the past, people have taught American history as all of the good sides of America, but with Dr. B, he is showing us everything so we can form our own opinions and our own perspectives on things. I think that is what he is trying to accomplish. I really like the way he taught us. I really like how he teaches us everything so everybody has their own opinions and perspectives on things instead of being one-sided. Instead of teaching kids to be one-sided, he helps us to form opinions and get different perspectives...I feel like not a lot of teachers do that, maybe because of their own biases...Dr. B is doing a really good job of having us think for ourselves. (Appendix E.6, 152-160)

Emmett wants his students to interpret history, to be curious, to ask questions about what has been recorded as historical truth in textbooks – “to think for ourselves.” He refers to this type of detective work as trying to understand the “mentality” (or as Emmett jokingly pronounces it: men-tal-E-tay) of the time. Emma explains “mentality” as, “in order to understand the past, we have to understand what people were thinking at the time. I think that [by giving us] the paragraphs of what people said and thought, he is trying to help us see what was going on during that time period...I think he thinks that is important” (Appendix E.6, 54-59).

While the students in Emmett’s seventh period class seem to enjoy trying to *figure things out* through analyzing primary source documents, they often find, as Nicole notes during class,

that the documents are too difficult to read and interpret during the time allotted in class. Christie shares, “Sometimes, they are really hard to read, and Dr. B doesn’t always give us enough time to read through them before we discuss them. So that is tough” (Appendix E.6, 10-12).

Following up on the comments she made in class, Nicole explains:

He’ll give us primary source documents of people...who are thinking and writing and talking about these very concepts that we are learning about...Even though we go over what it means together, when we have time to just to read it on our own, people aren’t understanding the full concept of what people are trying to say...It is confusing or sometimes it is a little bit vague...I also think that sometimes people zone out when we do things like this, when it requires us to interpret something like this (pointing to the primary source docs). It’s interesting and I think it expands our learning, but I don’t know if it is necessarily the most engaging activity that we can have (Appendix E.6, 33-44).

Nicole notes that the difficulty of the readings and the lack of time given to interpret the documents can lead to a lack of “understanding the full concept” and can negate the potential of engaging students in primary document analysis. The activity is “interesting” and it “expands our learning,” but it is not engaging because the readings are too difficult for students to understand by themselves. When Emmett ultimately summarizes the documents for the students, or when he chooses to move on if the students are not able to complete all of the readings, the students get the message that these primary source documents are interesting but unimportant “extras.” As Melinda explains, “I also think that if time pushes something away, it is going to be these little things like these excerpts...it doesn’t hurt our learning too much if we don’t do them. These are not used for teaching us the actual material, but for understanding connections and significance



of certain things. So if that is pushed away, we still end up talking about the big picture” (Appendix E.6, 45-49). Emmett’s students know that if they do not finish reading and analyzing the documents, they “still end up talking about the big picture.”

Emmett wants his students to be curious, but when I share the students’ anonymous comments, he acknowledges that it is difficult to encourage his students to embrace inquiry.

There is a delicate line between helping them figure it out and telling them what the answer is. It seems like a lot of this helping kids figure things out is best done on a one-to-one basis...These kids live in a world of instant answers. They can just Google it. They often think that there is only one right answer. So I am not sure if helping them learn how to figure things out will become more my responsibility in the future or not. I think kids’ ability to figure things out for themselves is diminishing...a lot of these guys don’t want to have to figure things out...I don’t think the kids always read with real focus. Everything is skim reading. I don’t know. I am not sure how you get kids to figure things out. On the one hand, you could tell them that they won’t be successful if they don’t do it, but that goes against the philosophy of the school. I guess just give them numerous opportunities to do this and be consistent in expecting that. I think maybe over the long term they will become more accustomed and more adept at doing it...It’s just harder for these guys to read something to determine what is up with this. (Appendix D.4, 102-133)

Emmett laments the fact that his students have a tough time figuring things out on their own. He is a historian, and he clearly wants his students to have the same passion for “doing history” as he does. Could it be that the students need more time and more modeling and scaffolding as they try to decode primary sources? I wonder if teaching both *with* and *for* primary document analysis

could ignite in students the desire to *figure things out*. The students sometimes find it difficult to figure things out because they lack the time, the vocabulary, the reading speed and fluency, or the understanding of what to look for when reading historical sources. In addition to a lack of competence in “doing history,” the students also do not view this activity as important or necessary to understand the “big picture.” Emmett also suggests that often students are concerned about knowing the “the right answer” more than developing an interpretation of what might have been going on and why.

For some kids, the ones coming from the “What do I need to know” perspective, this is very frustrating. As a teacher, evaluating student progress on this is tricky because you can ask about events, and the students know them on a test, you can say that they have learned a lot. But here it is not a right or wrong answer. How to evaluate their progress is a little harder. (Appendix D.4, 147-151)

Helping his students to “do the work of historians” is Emmett’s goal (Appendix C.2). While the students are researching slave narratives, Emmett cheers them on. “At the end of the year, you [will] realize that the coolest thing you learned about was history. This is the kind of thing you do if you are a real historian. You would be reading historical sources and trying to figure out what they tell you about the past.” Emmett suggests that learning how to “think like an historian” might require “numerous opportunities” (Appendix D.4, 125). I agree. By supporting student autonomy, competency and relatedness during this learning activity, as Emmett suggests, “over the long term, they will become more accustomed and more adept at doing it.”

## **Resolving Cognitive Ambiguity**

*My teacher supports my autonomy in social studies when he or she challenges me to rethink my preconceived notions of “what happened” in history and counters what I think I know with new or different information.*

Closely related to encouraging students to “figure things out” is a concept called “cognitive dissonance” (Festinger, 1962). Teachers may support student autonomy in learning when they present experiences that turn students’ preconceived notions of a topic upside down. By pointing out or having students discover unexpected, incongruous, or paradoxical aspects of the content, students are more likely to want to resolve that conflict by pursuing learning (Ames, 1990; Brophy, 2010; Festinger, 1962; Stipek, 2002a). This concept of cognitive dissonance relates to the cognitive theories of Piaget (1973), who held that learners are constantly interacting with their environment as they assimilate and accommodate information. When they become aware that they hold contradictory views about a situation, they must resolve the conflict through equilibration. When teachers foil students’ expectations, the students have a compelling cognitive and motivational need to seek out information.

I find evidence of students’ cognitive dissonance during two of my observations of Emmett’s class; both of the classes address the topic of slavery. The following snapshot of a class Emmett labels “How to Study a Sub-Altern Culture?” illustrates how Emmett challenges his students’ preconceived notions of slavery in America (Appendix B.6).

*“Do I have any volunteers to come up to the map to figure this out? Beth decides to volunteer because she is wearing her University of Charleston t-shirt. “I want you to find Charleston, S.C. on the map...draw a line on the map going east...Now find London, England for us and draw on the map a line going due west. Ok. Thanks for your help.”*

*“Look at this kids. Remember how we said most of our slave population is coming from down there (points to western Africa on map). Who is closer to home in South Carolina in terms of the climate zones of the world, the people coming from Africa or the people coming from England?”*

*“Africa.”*

*“Definitely Africa, and the point here is if you are someone who is coming to the New World from England, and you go to the low country in South Carolina, it is going to be like you are going to Mars. You are going to be somewhere where the climate, the animals, the environment, the trees, just everything is going to be pretty different than what you would be accustomed to in merry old England. If you were forced to go to South Carolina from the east coast of Africa, it is not going to be the same, but there are going to be many similarities.*

*“And one of the key things that helps us figure out what the slaves were doing is that they were going into an area that they would know more about than white Europeans who go down south to become slave owners.*

*“Take this idea of Pathfinders. And without saying, “finding a path,” what do you think path-finding means? Ben?”*

*“Mapping the terrain to see how maybe we can expand the farm here?”*

*“Yeah, I think you’re on the right track. Anyone want to add to that? Nicole?”*

*“Maybe is navigating and knowing where to go?”*

*“Yeah, that is what we are talking about. And kids, one of the things that is very complicated for the colonists coming to the New World is that everything is swamps and marshes and jungles and especially when we are early in the settlement, there are no roads and very few towns. Everything is kind of this big blob of wilderness. The Europeans are completely clueless.*

*The people, who would know how to get into a swamp area and would know how to travel and then get back to where they came from, are not going to be the Europeans. It is going to be whom?*

*“The slaves!”*

*“Yes, it’s going to be the slaves. The slaves are going to know stuff, some of it is going to be this boy scout type of stuff, what side of the tree does the moss grow on, or where is the sun in the morning, or stuff like that. The slaves know how to navigate in the woods, they know how to mark their trails, they know how to get from one place to another in a way that the Europeans do not. And one of the big things to come out of that is that path finding is very much linked to the idea of communication...Guys, this is a frontier environment, this is a dangerous time. Emergencies come up. There could be a threat of an Indian attack, or perhaps the Spanish are coming or maybe sickness breaks out. Things could happen where you have to get a message to the closest neighbor as quickly as you can. The people who are able to do this are the slaves. Based on written records from the slave owners, we can see that they literally depended on their slaves to be the communication lifeline for this whole deal. But think fast boys and girls. If the slaves are out delivering messages for everybody, what else could they do?*

*“Run away.”*

*“Yeah, they could run away. Apparently, they didn’t or they didn’t so much that the owners are depending on them to be the communication people. And you have this kind of unexpected degree of trust here. But the slaves are the ones with the ability, they are teaching their masters how to do this.” (Appendix B.6)*

Emmett continues in his lecture to stress how the slaves’ knowledge of hunting, pharmacopeia (making medicines out of plants), making tools, turning palmetto trees into

pettiagers (or small boats like catamarans), and growing rice contributed to the Europeans' survival during the early days of colonial settlement. The students wonder why the slaves do not run away with their knowledge of the swamps or how to make boats, why they do not kill their masters with their knowledge of poisonous plants or how to make tools, and why they choose to help their masters find and grow food to eat. At the end of Emmett's lecture, one student, a recent immigrant from Africa's west coast, raises his hand to comment. "Ok, just to clarify everything, when the slaves came over, they brought their knowledge of how to do a lot of things over to the colonies and the colonists really benefitted from what the slaves provided" (Appendix B.6, 360-362). Emmett confirms his summary:

Guys, the big point of the lesson here is that when you are studying slavery, not to dismiss the brutality and harshness, but you want to be very much aware of what these people did and what their contributions were to American History. This is huge. Everything connected to quality of life, the slaves were teaching the masters what to do. Just keep that in mind. I am just picking South Carolina as one example, but you can do this stuff in a lot of different places. The big thing is that the slaves were not just following orders. The slaves are teaching the masters what to do in many cases." (Appendix B.6, 342-348)

Throughout this class, I write copious notes about student engagement; they show direct eye content with their teacher, they are listening and responding to Emmett's questions, and they are asking questions that demonstrate their desire to understand. Emmett challenges his students' beliefs about slavery by looking at slave agency in the colonies rather than only looking at slaves as victims. As a result, his students want to know more, and they form connections to the content. Creating cognitive dissonance appears to be another way that teachers can help their

students respond personally to the content. Emmett's approach to slavery enables the students to feel more self-directed in their learning because they want to know more; they want to resolve the conflict between what they thought about slaves and what they have just learned. By challenging students to consider the active role that slaves played in the colonists' survival, Emmett supports his students' need to see the relevance, meaning and worth of digging below the surface of learning about slavery.

In another example of cognitive dissonance, Emmett challenges his students to "do the work of historians" by reading and interpreting *Slave Narratives of the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 – 38*. In the 1930s, the U.S. government's Works Progress Administration (WPA) hired out-of-work writers to interview former slaves. Emmett's assignment for the students is to read several narratives from the hundreds of published narratives, select three narratives on which to focus, and reflect on what they learn about slavery from reading the narratives.

On the day that the students present their findings, Emmett asks those students whose narratives confirm their ideas about slavery to stand on the left side of the room, and those students whose narratives ran counter to their perceptions of what former slaves would say to gather on the right side of the room. The majority of Emmett's students are surprised by their findings. Steven mentions that in one slave narrative he read, the master never beat him and never beat any slaves on the plantation. His only job was to be the friend of the master's younger son to keep him company; "he kind of sounded in the interview like he missed it" (OB 15, 54). Inis also discovers information about slavery that ran counter to her understanding. "It was hard for me to find narratives that said bad things about slavery. The ones I read were when they became free; they couldn't depend on their masters for shelter and food anymore. They were basically saying that their freedom kind of took away their freedom" (Appendix B.8, 56-59).

Emma notes, “I have never heard of a story where there was mutual trust between a slave and a slave master.” Emmett acknowledges, “Well that is not the sort of thing you would expect to find in something like this” (Appendix B.8, 71-72).

Although several students share stories that confirm the their collective understanding of how former slaves would describe their experiences, the majority of students read slave narratives that run counter to what they expected to find. The cognitive dissonance is clear; however, Emmett wants to make sure that students understands that his purpose is not to portray slavery as anything but evil. Rather, Emmett asks:

To what extent can we believe the stuff that this group found? Just think about this for a minute. We are mostly talking about people who are in rural areas. How many of you, when you were reading these interviews, read about someone who lived very close to where he or she had been a slave on a plantation? It is interesting that almost all of you are raising your hands. You know the way it kind of works in small southern towns is typically, there are a few families that are kind of in charge of everything. And the same families that may have been in charge of everything 70 years earlier, before the Civil War, they are still going to be around in many cases in the 1930s. And if someone is saying ‘oh, back when I was a slave, Mr. Smith’s family were my masters,’ and if Mr. Smith’s grandson is now the mayor of the town, or the chief of police, or the city council president or something like that, are you going to say bad things about Mr. Smith?”

(Appendix B.8, 168-179)

Jesse adds that she realizes that the people who were being interviewed were very old, and they would have to have lived in decent conditions to be able to give an interview at 98. “And I am thinking that if it is 1930 and you are being interviewed by a white person, you are probably



going to sugarcoat some aspects of slavery” (Appendix B.8, 165-167). Emmett applauds Jesse’s analysis and adds, “this is the most intense time in the Jim Crow south...they are going to be very cautious about what they say. So, all of these are factors when looking at these narratives” (Appendix B.8, 187).

The students experience cognitive dissonance when they read slave narratives that depict positive accounts of slavery. However, Emmett is careful to make sure the students understand that the lesson is not to counter their perceptions of slavery. Rather, he wants to challenge his students to think about why these former slaves may have provided such glowing accounts. He also wants them to consider how students of history might use these accounts to understand slavery. Essentially, he wants them to “do what historians do.” By challenging students’ expectations of what they thought they would find in the narratives, Emmett provides an impetus to get his students to think, to dig deeper into how they can learn about the past. In a follow up meeting with the focus group, Emma shares why she appreciates this activity.

The goal wasn’t to have us think that slavery wasn’t bad at all. I think that he was trying to get us to do a little thinking on our own. It was really interesting to think about *why* people said that slavery wasn’t that bad. It was interesting to figure out how it got to that point where they said those things. It wasn’t about having us think that slavery wasn’t bad. There is lots of information that tells us that slavery was bad. It’s just that that particular side of the story of slavery was really interesting” (Appendix E.6, 105-111).

Based on comments from the focus group following the activity, the students enjoyed this activity. Emmett later told me that he was very pleased with their papers depicting their findings. Why did the students engage – behaviorally, emotionally and cognitively – in this activity? Not only did they connect emotionally and personally to the content, but they also choose their

narratives, and they worked hard to “figure out what was going on.” However, it was the surprising or contradictory nature of the content, the resulting conflict through cognitive dissonance, which pushed the students to seek out more information. This activity triggered the students’ motivation to learn to resolve this conflict. Social studies teachers might compel students to experience cognitive dissonance by countering their prior understandings, or misunderstandings, about any social studies topic. This strategy supports student autonomy because it challenges students to reconsider their prior knowledge and gives them a compelling reason to seek out new information to resolve the cognitive ambiguity they experience.

### **Then and Now**

*My teacher supports my autonomy by helping me to discover connections between different periods of time, people, places and events. I find meaning in history when I can make connections between historical and current events.*

Throughout my many observations and interviews with teachers and students at The Gateway School, the theme of *making connections* emerged as a key facet of student engagement in learning history. Thus far, I describe *making connections* as emotional (Catch My Attention), personal (Personal Response and Choice), interpersonal (Interacting and Learning with Others) and cognitive (Figuring It Out and Resolving Cognitive Ambiguity). Another type of connection emerges when students discover patterns across different periods of time, people, places and events. For Emmett:

...the real evidence of student thinking comes from students finding connections between topics of the past and events of the present. For instance, last week when we studied the American movement into Texas, one student asked, "So were the Americans actually

illegal immigrants in Texas?" To me, this shows a great degree of reflection and a stronger ability to use knowledge than for a student to just state "'Stephen Austin took Americans into Texas in 1821.'" (Appendix D.2, 10-15)

Emmett equates making connections between past and present with deep thinking; he distinguishes reflective thinking about a topic from mere memorization of facts. While many of his students can memorize facts and often select correct answers on certain types of tests, Emmett suggests, "they may not be able to work with more abstract ideas, or, take concrete ideas and use them in abstract situations" (Appendix D.2, 23-25). However, Melinda notes that thinking abstractly requires significant content knowledge. "[Memorizing stuff in history] is kind of baseline because our teacher's goal is not to have you memorize stuff. In order to get to the level of thinking and making connections and where he wants to go with that, you have to have certain things memorized" (Appendix E.5, 47-49). A strong knowledge base might thus be a prerequisite to students' ability to use their knowledge to connect past and present.

While many social studies and history teachers struggle with how to guide their students to see the "connections" between "then and now," for Emmett, "...it all goes back to this American Studies thing. The whole point of the discipline is to understand how cultures work...everything I do is connected to this idea of 'How do you understand American culture?'" (EB, Interview, 91-92). Emmett uses this *essential question* as a thread to weave his American Studies History curriculum content together. Rather than try to provide students with relevant connections for each individual topic in the curriculum, Emmett's goal is to tie each topic and unit – whether it is Colonial America or Slavery or Immigration or American Imperialism – to this larger question of "How does American culture work?" (Appendix C.2, 87-88).

Emmett integrates the question of “What is American about American culture?” in several ways throughout his course. One strategy is to use historical literature. I mention earlier that students in Emmett’s American Studies History classes read two pieces of historical literature: *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* during the unit on colonial life in America and *Ragged Dick; or, Street Life in New York with the Boot Blacks* during the unit on race and ethnicity during the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Emmett chose both books because they illuminate, in very different ways, aspects of American culture and the American Dream.

In an informal discussion about his choice of *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, Emmett explains that he wants his students to read the book as a window into the emergence of a unique America. For the final assessment on the book, Emmett offers the students the following choice of essay topics:

Mr. Benjamin Vaughn states, “All that has happened to you is also connected with the detail of the manners and situation of a rising people; in this respect, I do not think the writings of Caesar and Tacitus can be more interesting to a true judge of human nature and society.” In other words, the life of Franklin can provide the world with insight into the emergence of the American nation. Do you accept this? To what extent can we consider Ben a symbol for America? (Document, Ben Franklin Essay)

Emmett assigns *The Autobiography of Ben Franklin* to help students examine life during colonial America and to discover “What is uniquely American about America?” However, Nicole notes that she does not see the connection:

In terms of learning about colonial America through Benjamin Franklin’s life story as he told it, I just don’t think I benefitted from the book in that way...the fact that we didn’t learn anything else for that month besides reading that book, there was a disconnect there.

It kind of felt like here was a break from learning about American History and it was time to learn about Benjamin Franklin's life...the purpose of that month-long excursion in our class kind of went over me (Appendix E.5, 163-167).

Emma agrees with Nicole. "I think Ben Franklin was definitely a factor in learning about America, but I don't know if it was like the main way to learn about colonial America" (Appendix E.5, 158-160). Are there key passages that illustrate the emergence of the American nation? What questions might have guided the students as they looked for context clues of a unique America throughout the book?

In addition to using historical literature, Emmett provides students with primary source documents that push them to consider: "What is American about America?" For example, Emmett has the students read an essay called: *What is an American?*, which was written by French American author Hector St. John Crevecoeur. Emmett introduces this assignment by asking students, "What is the main point of our American Studies class? What is our big question?" Melinda shares, "What is American Culture?" Emmett explains that Crevecoeur is living in New York during the American Revolution, and he thinks Americans are peculiar, so he writes a lot of letters home to his family in France. He asks: "Why are Americans so different? What is American culture all about?" (Appendix B.3, 9-10).

Sample excerpts from students' essays reflect a basic understanding of what Crevecoeur found unique about American culture:

Melinda: "Even though it is evident now that America at that time was not very unified, to Crevecoeur, America must have been a strange cohesion of different backgrounds, especially in comparison to the rest of the world (or France) at the time"

Beth: “Crevecoeur does a great job of describing America’s individuality by addressing how women and children help men farm the crops that will solely benefit them, not “a despotic prince, a rich abbot, or a mighty lord.” He also goes on to describe their little association with religion and willingness to accommodate with citizens’ religious beliefs, or lack thereof.”

Emma: “An American is expected to leave behind all of the old traditions and prejudices of European domination to create his own styles, traditions and government while still being someone who forms his own ideas and opinions with intelligence.”

As these excerpts illustrate, Crevecoeur’s essay, written in 1782, provides modern-day audiences with fodder for discussions about what is unique about America. Questions like “How does Crevecoeur define American culture?” “Do you think Crevecoeur might make similar observations today?” “How might American culture, as defined by Crevecoeur, have shaped a unique political, economic, social or religious life in America?” could push students even further to examine the unique nature of American culture – both then and now.

When teachers encourage students to connect multiple, yet disparate, historical events throughout the course of the school year to one or two essential questions or persistent issues, students can begin to develop and understand larger concepts such as: “What is American culture?” or “What is freedom, or democracy, or justice?” By consistently returning to these questions, the students may eventually begin to make connections for themselves. These types of connections help move students further along the continuum toward autonomy and self-directed learning because the students develop a rationale or purpose for learning history. They engage in learning because they start to internalize why the learning is important and worthwhile. When

students associate learning history with persistent and important issues and questions, they invest more in learning (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

While Emmett's overall goal is for students to understand American culture, he also organizes the content of his American Studies History course by themes. The first semester examines, "How did the map of the United States come to be?" The second semester focuses first on the theme of "Race and Ethnicity throughout U.S. History" and then on "Post WWI Domestic and Foreign Policy." Emmett uses these themes to help the students connect various and isolated topics to bigger ideas. For example, Emmett explains that during second semester, "we'll be going back to the colonial period to see how people responded (to race and ethnicity). We'll look at the beginning of slavery, then immigration, like with the Irish and the Germans before the Civil War and then people from eastern and southern Europe after the Civil War, and then the Red Scare and ultimately going up to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s" (Appendix D.3, 13-17).

Emmett recognizes that not all students appreciate a thematic approach to history. "It's tricky because I think that some kids like it and for other kids it makes it harder for them to understand. Some of the kids said that it is much easier to learn history chronologically, this happened and then that happened...I am curious to see how the students respond to learning history in this type of a thematic way" (in person reflection/interview). Like essential questions, themes can provide a purposeful and intentional thread for teaching content. As Nicole recognizes:

Usually I would be in favor of looking at something chronologically because I need organization. But, I think that the way he organizes these themes and uses them as a bridge to other topics really helps to make it more educational...If we had just done

chronologically, we would have just moved from one time to the next. But with this format, it seemed like there was a purpose to move to the next topic...I think that putting history into themes helps Dr. B teach with intention, which I think is important”

(Appendix E.6, 133-137).

Nicole notes that teaching thematically provides a *purpose* to history teaching and learning, and she describes Emmett’s content selection as *intentional*. She also stresses that it is important that history teachers convey clearly their purpose and intent.

However, as Beth suggests, teaching how one concept like “race and ethnicity” changes over time can mean sacrificing the students’ desire to discover how events occurring at the same time, but in different places, connect. “I feel like we are so focused on slavery right now...but I would really like to look at slavery knowing what else is going on in America at the time we are talking about. I want to know everything, to look at it as a whole...I kind of wish we went chronologically...I really wish we could get the big picture, like what is going on everywhere while this is happening...” (Appendix E.6, 162-171). Beth’s reference to the “big picture” suggests that she values seeing connections among disparate events happening at the same time. Beth likes the idea of exploring a topic in depth (connections across time), but she also wants to see what else is happening at the same time (connections across place). Nicole summarizes this conflict between teaching thematically and chronologically:

When you teach things in separate topics like Dr. B is doing, you lose some of that...there were multiple important things happening at the same time. If he teaches about imperialism and then about race relations during WWI, they may have happened around the same time, but you don’t get the sense that they are connected. I am sure that he will talk about how they are connected, but I think it is harder to make that connection.



It is harder to show that things can be simultaneously important...(Appendix E.6, 133-145).

The important point here is that regardless of whether history teachers choose to teach chronologically or thematically, their students are seeking out connections across both time and place. Social studies and history teachers can convey to their students a sense of purpose and intention in their teaching by using essential questions as a thread to tie historical events and topics together, and/or by using themes to organize their content (Wiggins & McTighe, 2013).

When students see how the people, topics and events of history connect – both within the curriculum and to ongoing persistent and important modern-day questions – they are more likely to understand the purpose, and thus have more autonomy, in their learning.

### **Value Beyond the Classroom**

*My teacher supports my autonomy by showing me the “real world” value and utility of learning social studies and by encouraging me to present what I have learned to an authentic audience.*

Throughout my time with the eleventh grade focus group students, they describe their emotional, personal, interpersonal and cognitive connections to history content. However, their descriptions of “real-world” connections provide the clearest indications of engagement in learning social studies. For these students, connections to the real world imply a sense of utility in learning social studies. Melinda maintains that teachers are successful when they help their students see the world through the lens of that subject.

[In] AP government class, I began to see everything through the perspective of legal rights and government and politics...It’s fun because you can apply what you are learning in the real world. In my family, we like to debate stuff, and we argue a lot, so I would be

able to bring stuff I learned in class to those situations. It is very satisfying to know that you see things in the real world from your class. (Appendix E.4, 191-198)

In this example, Melinda describes opportunities to use what she learned in her AP government class to debate current issues at home with her family. The real world, for Melinda, means participating in the public discourse on controversial political issues. Similarly, Nicole shares that she is most engaged in learning when she has opportunities to take what she has learned in class and “apply that knowledge in the real world.”

I am currently taking political science... We'll talk about what the First Amendment is and what it means, and then we'll talk about real cases and where it is applied and what the decision was. That is the first step of the connection. The second step of the connection the teacher can't do for you because it has to happen on your own. The teacher can only help you take that first step and point you in the right direction. Later, I was talking to my dad about First Amendment rights that people should or should not have. I heard a sermon from my rabbi about instances of anti-Semitism, and we talked about how far First Amendment rights should go. A teacher can push you in the right direction as much as he or she possibly can, but I think it is up to you to apply that knowledge in the real world. (Appendix E.4, 202-214)

Like Melinda, Nicole describes the real world as participating in discussions about current and controversial issues. When students can use what they have learned in the classroom to understand and participate in discussions in the *real world*, they view social studies learning as relevant and worthwhile. Interestingly, in these examples, Melinda and Nicole describe “real world” connections that they made on their own. Their teachers may have “pushed them in the right direction,” but the students initiated their own connections by discussing persistent issues

with family members. In a similar example, Beth explains how she was able to apply what she learned in World History on her trip to Europe.

This summer, I went to London and Paris with my youth group and all of my friends were making fun of me like, “Beth you are such a nerd” because I remembered everything [from] World History [such as] French Revolution and Marie Antoinette...Then in London I knew so much as we traveled around. I realized how much I had learned in history. When I saw everything first hand like Notre Dame and the Eiffel Tower and all of these cool museums, I could relate to so many things. That’s when I knew that my teacher had succeeded. (Appendix E.4, 183-190)

Beth uses what she learned in World History to connect history to her experience traveling in Europe. Similarly, Nicole describes how she used what she learned in World History.

I went to England this summer and I went to a famous archeological museum in London. We saw these artifacts and I was able to relate it back to my experience in World History...So it was like I associated with something and then I remembered it, and I think that that is was learning is.” (Appendix E.4, 177-182)

Nicole, Beth and the other focus group students conceive of “making real-world connections” as being able to use what they learned in class to help them understand the world around them. The students apply what they learned in class to real-world situations, and, in turn, internalize the meaning and worth of what they learned in the classroom. The students describe teachers who “set them up” to make these connections for themselves as *successful*, and they define these types of real-world connections as *learning*.

Like his students, Emmett also believes he is successful when his students can take what they learn in his class and apply it beyond the classroom. “Ideally, I would like a student to take

an idea from class and find its significance outside of the classroom” (Appendix E.4, 27-28).

How does Emmett know if his students have formed those “real world connections?” Since Emmett teaches primarily eleventh graders, he talks to his former students when they are seniors. “Sometimes they’ll tell me about the things they’ve encountered that really shows they are making connections with what they did in here. That probably speaks to me more than someone who is able to get a high grade on his or her end of the year cumulative exam” (Appendix C.2 174-175). Emmett explains that students often come back from college visits and share that they noticed so many things they had learned in history. “That would make me think that they got something out of this class that they will be able to use down the road” (Appendix C.2, 176-179).

Emmett’s emphasis on the utility of learning history, having students use what they learn in class to “decode” the world around them, is central to student engagement in learning social studies and history. Yet, interestingly none of the examples that Emmett or his students describe as “real world” took place during their time in their social studies or history classes. The students’ “ah-ha” moments took place around the dining room table or on trips to see colleges or to Europe. Must teachers simply hope that their students will make those real world connections after they leave their classrooms? Are there any activities that teachers can implement throughout the school year that could provide real-world experiences for their students? Can students who might not have opportunities to debate current events around the dinner table or be fortunate enough to take trips to historical sites still experience real-world or authentic learning? How might teachers engage students in activities that “represent the thoughtful application or expression of knowledge found in the activities of adults in the field”? (Newmann et al., 1996).

Melinda suggests that teachers can use projects to help the students make real-world connections. Such projects, Melinda suggests, are “not necessarily to teach you the information,

but it is more to say, ‘Ok, you have learned this information, now so what?’” (Appendix E.4, 111-112). Projects that ask students to consider “now so what” might provide students with real-world connections that make classroom learning worthwhile and meaningful. Helping students to answer the “so what?” question can become the focus for social studies curriculum planning, and thus student learning. The focus group students emphasize that they need to make these real-world connections for themselves, autonomously, free from coercion or external factors. How might social studies teachers “push students in the right direction,” toward *real-world experiences* that students deem interesting and worth knowing?

In Emmett’s American Studies History class, students investigate “What is uniquely American about American culture?” How might Emmett’s students answer the “so what?” of investigations into American culture? Can students use what they have learned about American culture to explore how their own families or local communities support or counter their definitions of “American culture?” Can students use what they have learned to design and create physical or virtual exhibits depicting “American Culture,” and then share their exhibits with the local community? Could students use what they have learned to conceptualize, write and pitch a series of episodes for a reality television show called “Discovering American Culture” to a local cable station?

The responses of this study’s participants suggest that such authentic projects and activities could support student autonomy and engage students in learning social studies and history if they provide students with opportunities to: 1) Connect *emotionally* or *respond personally* to topics and presentation formats of their *choice*; 2) *Interact and learn with others*; 3) *Figure out* the “mentality” of people about questions and topics in American history; 4) Examine and interrogate *multiple perspectives* on *open-ended* and *ambiguous* questions worth

answering; 5) Discover *connections across time and place*; 6) *Engage* in the activities of adults in the *real world*, and; 7) Produce discourse, products or performances that have value beyond success in school (Newmann et al., 1996, p. 287).

To maximize their students' engagement, teachers can develop learning environments that support student autonomy and self-determination in planning, executing and presenting their work. However, as I explain in the next section, students also need their teachers to "point them in the right direction" (Appendix E.4, 208-209). Although autonomy support is *the* critical element for student engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000), self-determination theory holds that students will engage in and value only those learning activities that they can actually understand and believe they can master (Niemic & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000). For students to adopt extrinsic, as opposed to intrinsic, learning goals, they need to feel that they can be successful in pursuit of those goals. Thus, supporting students' perceptions of their competence is integral student engagement in learning activities.

### **Competence-Supportive Instructional Practices and Qualities of Learning Activities**

Earlier in this chapter, I note several cases where the students' perceived lack of competency-support diminishes their engagement in potentially interesting and worthwhile learning activities, especially when learning activities require greater cognitive demand. During the Mexican War primary source document analysis and discussions about *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, the students share that they often disengage from learning when the material is too difficult or if they are not sure of what they are supposed to do. In other cases, when students understand what Emmett expects of them and they believe the work is challenging and interesting, as with the slave narratives' analysis, they engage in learning activities, emotionally, cognitively and behaviorally. As I look for evidence of competence support in Emmett's

American Studies History class, I note several instances during which the students' perceptions of their abilities either support or thwart their engagement in classroom activities.

### **Challenge Me**

During one of the eleventh grade focus groups, I provide the students with several slips of paper, each listing a different type of thinking as described in the book *Making Thinking Visible* (Ritchhart et al., 2012). Nicole wants to discuss “reasoning with evidence” (p. 11).

On the first test, the last free response was: Do you think that geography was the biggest factor in the migration to the New World from Europe? That entire paper was using evidence that we had learned in class up until that point in the year and reasoning and making connections as to how geography affected what happened in America. That can be really hard for me to do sometimes, but I think that is something that I am really challenged to do in this class (Appendix E.5, 113-119).

In this example, Emmett challenges his students to answer an open-ended question by thinking and reasoning with evidence from what they had learned in class; a skill that Nicole admits is often very difficult. Nicole does not back away from this challenge; however, she seems to embrace and appreciate the opportunity to think.

Like Nicole, Melinda also describes thinking as challenging. She selects “considering different viewpoints and perspectives” (p. 11).

One of the ways that we have done this type of thinking in Dr. B's class is especially when we were learning about the northern, southern and middle colonies and how each of them had different relationships with England. Like the south thought, “Yeah, mercantilism is good” and the north did not want mercantilism. So we were able to see

why different people thought differently throughout the different colonies” (Appendix E.5, 131-137).

There is a consensus among the group that, “Dr. B does a really good job of getting us to think” (Appendix E.5, 215). The group also shares that Emmett challenges them to “uncover complexity and go below the surface” (p. 13) and “identify patterns and make generalizations” (p. 14).

Although the girls mention several ways that Emmett challenges them to think in his class, one of the focus group students comments anonymously in the online survey that she does not feel challenged to think in American Studies History.

In our regular (not AP) American Studies class, we are not much challenged to think beyond the surface level of history...at least not on our own. We may talk about it with the class, but almost every question asked seems to have a right and wrong answer.

Because our homework is almost always busywork that covers material we cover again in class, I don't work as hard on it as I probably should. (Appendix F)

This student clarifies that her teacher does not necessarily challenge her to think “beyond the surface level” or on her own. Her comment suggests both a lack of autonomy and competency. Encouraging students to think critically about different perspectives or patterns in history is neither challenging or engaging to students if they feel the teacher is not allowing the students to come to their own conclusions or dig below the surface. In my conversations with Emmett, he suggests that he tends to have more in-depth discussions in his Advanced Placement classes. “I think it is because the kids are a little more engaged with the material they are studying. They can go to that next level of connecting their opinions with specific people and ideas in history



and using that information to prove or illustrate what they are talking about (Appendix D.6, 115-118).

When teachers provide their students with questions or situations that challenge them to think for themselves, they are more likely to engage their students than teachers who demand little thinking or who ask for low-level recall of memorized information (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). In contrast, when teachers provide “surface-level” thinking or “busywork,” the students may perceive that their teachers do not believe they are capable. It is important to note that teachers who provide challenging work without providing students with the structural supports necessary (i.e. think time at home and in class, opportunities to share and discuss topics with peers, modeling and scaffolding of how to “think,” etc.) are more likely to thwart student engagement than nurture it. In the next section, I discuss the types of structures that may support students as they take on challenging work.

### **Be Clear About What You Want Me to Know and Do**

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002) suggests that before students can engage in challenging work, they need to know what they are expected to learn and do, and how their work will be evaluated. At the beginning of the second semester, Emmett lays out the terms for how he plans to assess the students.

For second semester, you’re going to write a paper on Ragged Dick [historical fiction novel], and then the rest is going to be pretty similar to before. I will take all of your quizzes and average them up and that will count for something. Your homework and class participation grade will be a major factor. Then, let’s say we will have three big

tests...I will take all of this stuff, divide by six and that will be your final grade. Does anyone have any questions? (Appendix B.8, 21-27)

The students respond with affirmative nods and a handful of “that’s cool.” Emmett’s emphasis on homework and class participation as a “major factor” tells the students that he values their input and he wants them to take their homework assignments seriously. The students did not have any questions.

One way that Emmett establishes his expectations is through “inconsequential quizzes.” Sometimes, as with the quizzes on *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, Emmett asks the students to take out a piece of paper and answer five simple and straightforward questions. He uses these quizzes to check that students have completed the reading (EB, personal communication). In other cases, Emmett’s quizzes are more in depth and demanding. For example, Emmett uses the quiz on slavery as evidence of student learning. “When I see how they did on the quiz, that would be the evidence to me whether or not they were able to put all of this together” (Appendix D.6, 28-30). Emmett also wants the quiz to help the students gauge their competence and understanding of slavery (Appendix G.6).

I see that [quizzes] as practice for the test...The idea is that they can do this, and I don’t really count it for much. When they get it back, they will know which of these topics they understand and which ones they need to work on some more. These quizzes help them to see what they know and what they don’t know (Appendix D.6, 39-44).

Quizzes for Emmett are a self-check for students. They “don’t count for much,” but they help students to gauge what they know and what they do not understand. The quizzes are also a check for Emmett. If he finds that his students are struggling with a particular concept or topic, “I will spend more time than I had planned to insure they understand before we move on” (Appendix

C.2, 109-112). In this sense, they are a type of formative assessment. When it is time for the test, the students should have a good idea of what Emmett expects of them.

Knowing what is important to know is central to the students' perceptions of competence. Sol shares, "It helps when the chapter has questions at the end to see if you understood the chapter. If not, then you probably have to reread it again. (Appendix E.4, 29-32). Beth also notes that she wants to know what is important. "If there is something highlighted or bolded or there are pictures and graphs, and the font size is bigger it makes it easier to read. It makes me want to read it more because it is more like, 'Oh, this is highlighted, it's probably important'" (Appendix E.4, 25-28). When students ask, "What do I need to know or do?" they are sharing that they want, and need, to know how to be successful. How teachers respond to this question verbally and through assessments speaks directly to the types of achievement goals they establish for their students. Is the goal for students to master content, to think and reason with evidence, to learn how to "figure things out," and to make connections, or is the purpose to know names and dates on a study guide and to get a good grade on tests or essays.

Based on my observations and interviews with Emmett and his students, Emmett's focus is on mastery of content and historical thinking – he wants students to be curious and "figure things out" for themselves. Despite his mastery-oriented goals, Emmett shares that his students often care more about their performance and getting good grades. A focus on performance rather than mastery can thwart student engagement because the students focus on external reasons (e.g. grades) versus internal reasons (e.g. understanding) for engaging in the work. Instilling a mastery-oriented mindset in young people who are immersed in a performance-oriented culture is a huge challenge for teachers. Teachers can develop mastery-learning mindsets by providing authentic assessments, setting clear and high expectations with opportunities for revision and

reflection, and by teaching learning strategies that demonstrate to students how they can be successful (Ames, 1990; Dweck, 2006). Knowing what is important and how they can be successful are critical for students to engage in learning.

In addition to using the textbook to show students what is important to know for his class, Emmett also uses class notes to support student competency in his classroom. Christie explains, “I really like how he has his class set up, like he has notes on one board. But he doesn’t necessarily read off them, he kind of uses them as a guide” (Appendix E.5, 224-225). I notice during several observations that Emmett circles and stars important topics on the board. Emma explains, “He tells us when it’s a big idea” (Appendix E.5, 200). Nicole also appreciates when Emmett says, “This is a really big idea!” and he lets us know that there is a connection between these things. He does that often. It’s just the way he formulates his notes” (Appendix E.5, 192-196). Melinda shares that she always bolds those “important points” in her notes. “And we see later though what we talk about why it is such a big idea and why we need to drill that idea into our heads” (Appendix E.5, 201-202).

In addition to helping students understand what is important to know in his class, Emmett also wants his students to think that his class is very organized. To provide a “flow” to his classes, at the end of each class, Emmett shares what the students will do the following day. Then, at the beginning of each class, Emmett revisits what they did the day before. “You know, for all these kids, a zillion things could have happened since 7<sup>th</sup> period yesterday” (Appendix C.2, 126-127). Emmett has found that providing connections from one day to the next helps to keep the students organized and on track, which ultimately supports their needs to be successful. By setting clear expectations through frequent and inconsequential quizzes, helping students to

focus on the “big ideas” through class notes and textbook readings, and providing a flow from one class to the next, Emmett helps to support his students’ needs to feel competence in his class.

### **Show Me How to Be Successful**

Emmett shares that by the time the students are eleventh graders, they do not need as much scaffolding and modeling with such basic skills as note taking and studying for tests as perhaps eighth grade students might need. When I notice that some students use their cell phones to snap pictures of the notes on the board, Emmett responds, “My idea would be that the kids write down the notes as we went through and so they could fill in stuff and just use the notes [on the board] as a guide...If they just take pictures of the notes, they aren’t going to do very well” (EB, personal communication). However, when I ask him if he helps students with their note taking skills or if he checks their notes for content or organization, he explains, “No, I think that that is the type of thing you do in middle school. Generally I feel like the kids know how to do this type of thing” (Appendix B.7, 325-326).

The students in the focus group confirm Emmett’s assumption. Nicole, Melinda and Sol note that they write down everything Emmett said. Beth shares, “The girl who sits next to me legitimately writes every single word Dr. B says. I have seen her do it, word for word” (Appendix E.6, 267-269). Melinda and the other girls underscore that they always bold the “big ideas” in their notes (Appendix E.6, 199). While writing down every word that Emmett says may not be the most effective or efficient note-taking strategy, when Emmett stresses the “big ideas” by circling or underlining them on the board, in a sense he is modeling how to take good notes.

Emmett may not need to model and scaffold when and how to take notes; however, his students share that they often struggle with how to read and interpret primary source documents.

History teachers may engage their students in what they perceive to be interesting and autonomy-supportive primary document analysis activities. However, if the readings are too difficult, or if the teacher does not provide enough instructional support through scaffolding and modeling of how to read and interpret the documents, the potential for engagement may be lost.

### **Give Me Frequent & Constructive Feedback and Encourage Me to Reflect on My Learning**

In addition to providing challenging work, clear and high expectations, and modeling and scaffolding to support students' needs to feel competent, teachers may also provide consistent and constructive feedback on how their students are progressing toward mastery, and encourage their students to reflect on their progress toward mastery (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). One tool that Emmett uses to provide feedback is by giving students quizzes "that don't count for much" throughout a unit. Another way that Emmett lets students know how they are doing in his class is by writing extensive comments on written assignments. "I am a big advocate of writing as far as an education thing, which is why it takes me so long to grade stuff and get it back to the kids" (Appendix C.2,199-200). On the student work that I observed, I noted that Emmett provides a great deal of written feedback and commentary. He does not focus simply on incorrect information, but rather he pushes students to consider additional questions and ideas.

I did not gather any data that suggests that Emmett encourages his students to reflect on their progress, to self-assess their progress toward writing or supporting their opinions with evidence from the text. However, I also did not intentionally ask Emmett or the focus group students whether student reflections on their work would support their need for competence. When students reflect on their strengths and weaknesses in learning activities such as discussions, primary source document analysis, homework, and writing research papers, and

when they develop plans to achieve success, students may shift the accountability for learning and success from the teacher back to the themselves, which not only supports their need for competency, but also their need to feel self-directed in their learning (Niemic & Ryan, 2009, Reeve, 2012).

### **Relatedness-Supportive Instructional Contexts**

When students feel autonomous and self-directed in their learning, and they perceive that they can be successful in their learning, they are more likely to engage in learning activities (Deci & Ryan, 2002). However, even those students who have internalized the reasons for learning and who believe they can be successful might not engage in learning activities if they do not feel respected and cared for by the teacher and the other students in the classroom. Self-determination theory suggests that at the heart of getting students to identify and internalize reasons for engaging in learning activities is providing students with a sense of connectedness or *relatedness* to their teachers and their peers in the classroom (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

One aspect of relatedness is the teacher's enthusiasm for and passion about the subject. As Melinda shares, "Not only does the teacher have to know what they are talking about and really know their field, but it is also so important that they are passionate about it. When I have read a book I really like, I get so excited about it and I say to my friends, 'Here, let me share this book with you!' That is so important to have that energy coming from a classroom" (Appendix E.4, 41-45). There is no doubt that Emmett knows his content and that he is passionate about the subject of American Studies. He frequently introduces activities by saying things like, "Guys, let's start looking at these things. They are cool and interesting!" (Appendix B.4, 132) or, "At the end of the year, you will realize that the coolest thing you learned about was history. This is the kind of thing you do if you are a real historian!" (Appendix B.7, 337-339). Emmett enjoys

talking to the students about history and they often share that excitement. “I would say the biggest indication that the kids are excited about learning when they are talking to you about it, especially when they are not even in class. They just talk to you in the hallways or come in on their own free will just to talk to you about it” (Appendix C.2, 78-79). When teachers or peers, to whom students feel connected, value learning activities, students are more likely to willingly participate in those learning activities (Ryan & Deci, 2000, Reeve, 2012).

Teachers may draw students into learning by modeling a passion for learning history; however, students are more willing to engage in the difficult work involved in deep learning if they know that their teachers genuinely respect and value them (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Emmett demonstrates that he cares about his students in many observable (and some non-observable) ways. On many occasions, he shows sympathy for their workload. When the students share that the Ben Franklin readings are taking more than an hour, he shortens the reading load; on Halloween, he makes sure not to give any homework. Emmett explains that one of the fundamental ideas at The Gateway School is:

...kids learn best they are comfortable and feel respected rather than school being this punitive thing. We want people to want to learn rather than look at it in terms of consequences and punishments and all of that. I would like to think that I would be like that anyway, but I am very mindful that that is what we need to be doing as [Gateway] teachers. (Appendix D.4, 137-141)

Although it is clear to me that Emmett cares for his students, I do not explicitly ask the students about their sense of relatedness in his classroom. I may unintentionally focus more on how Emmett supports his students’ autonomy and competence than I do on how he supports their needs for relatedness. While I note a few instances where students discuss their feelings about



relatedness, I do not investigate explicitly how the eleventh grade students interpret their sense of relatedness or how Emmett supported this need.

Emmett is clearly mindful of students who do not contribute in class. “I look at it like some people are just quiet and I shouldn’t try to force them into speaking out more than they are comfortable” (Appendix C.2, 155-160). However, Sol’s reason for not contributing to class discussions is that she is afraid to be wrong. While there are many factors that go into fostering classroom interactions, students need to know that they are safe to make mistakes before they will participate. Students who are performance-goal rather than mastery-goal oriented often feel the need to protect their images as “smart,” and therefore shy away from taking on challenging work or taking chances (Dweck, 2006). To counter this, teachers can establish mastery-oriented classrooms where students feel free to make mistakes as they pursue learning. However, the research on achievement goals suggests that mastery-oriented classrooms are difficult to find in an education system that stresses high-stakes testing and accountability (Ames, 1990; Dweck, 2006).

In this chapter, I interpret student perceptions of their autonomy, competency, and relatedness in an effort to make visible student experiences of engagement in Emmett’s classroom. In the next chapter, I take a closer look at the implications of this study for social studies teachers and teacher educators as I focus on my primary research question: “How might social studies/history teachers promote and sustain their students’ engagement in learning activities?” When engagement is conceived of as a relationship, then student engagement in learning social studies can be conceived of as the students’ relationships with the contexts their social studies teachers provide for them. I draw on my findings to argue that at the heart of

student engagement in learning social studies is making connections and forming relationships – with the content, with their own success, and with their peers and their teacher.

## **CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION – IN SEARCH OF CONNECTIONS**

*History doesn't click naturally for me, so I need someone to teach me who can really make me motivated to learn it!*

~ Melinda, eleventh grade student, the Gateway School

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this multiple case study was to investigate how social studies teachers promote and sustain their students' engagement in social studies learning; to apply self-determination theory in practice in two social studies classrooms to learn, from both teachers and students, “how student engagement works and when it works” (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012, p. 814). The study's findings clearly reveal that when young people understand why what they are learning is important, how they can be successful, and that their teachers care about them, they are far more likely to engage in learning social studies, regardless of their individual interests in the subject area. Young people want to engage in learning that is meaningful, worthwhile, and useful in the real world, and they want to think for themselves about issues for which there are multiple perspectives and no “right” answers; they want to discuss important issues with their classmates, and learn how to make informed decisions about difficult and controversial topics.

Interestingly and importantly, these are the same engaging activities that the Center for Information Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) recommends as best practices for “developing effective citizens” (2003). Effective and engaged citizens do far more

than vote and pay taxes. They educate themselves about important issues, speak out against injustices, question their leaders, volunteer, deliberate controversial topics, support or protest public policies, and practice tolerance (Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE, 2003). Thus, student engagement with academic work, defined in this study as, “constructive, enthusiastic, willing, emotionally positive and cognitively focused participation with learning activities in school” (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012, p. 22), is both necessary as a means to achievement and desirable as an outcome of social studies education.

With a better understanding of how and why young people engage in social studies, I pursued the primary research question guiding this study: How might social studies teachers promote and sustain students’ engagement in academic work? With the help of two engaging teachers and twelve willing student participants, I conducted a two-year-long investigation into the phenomenon of student engagement in social studies. Using case study design and qualitative content analysis, I found that when teachers structured their lessons to support their students’ psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, they were more likely to help internalize their students’ motivations for learning. Rather than compel students to learn through common external rewards and punishments, these teachers found ways to “draw the kids to learning rather than to pull them or push them” (Appendix C.2, 249).

In this final chapter, I identify practical strategies that teachers can use to support their students’ needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, and, as a result, engage their students in learning social studies. Conceiving of these strategies as “making connections” helped me to make student engagement in academic work “visible.” Since discussions emerged as a potentially effective strategy for engaging students, I explore in depth how teachers might structure discussions for optimal student engagement. In addition, I examine potential

implications of this study for self-determination theory, teacher education, and future research. Before young people will engage in learning in our social studies classrooms, they want to know: Do I want to learn this, and why? Can I be successful? Does my teacher care about me? In this study, I hope to provide teachers, through actual classroom examples, with strategies for how they might go about designing their curriculum and instruction to get their students to answer a resounding “Yes! Yes! and Yes!”

### **Revisiting the Theoretical Framework**

To examine how social studies teachers can support their students’ motivation to engage in academic work, I applied Ryan and Deci’s (2000) *self-determination theory* of motivation and engagement. According to this theory, young people are innately curious beings who possess a natural love of learning. Thus, social studies teachers should be able to engage students in academic work by tapping into their students’ innate desire to learn. Yet, many teachers use external rewards and punishments to compel students to engage in schoolwork, often undermining and stifling the students’ natural and volitional processes required for high-quality learning. Students may work hard to get good grades, for example, but they may not demonstrate engagement or “constructive, enthusiastic, willing, emotionally positive and cognitively focused participation with learning activities in school” (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012, p. 22).

Self-determination theorists offer teachers an alternative to using extrinsic rewards to coerce students to engage in academic work (Deci & Ryan, 2002). They suggest that external motivators fall along a continuum, from external motivation that is controlling to external motivation that is autonomous (see Figure 4). On the controlled end of the continuum are those extrinsic motivators (e.g. good/bad grades, praise/reprimands, bribes, academic comparison),

which teachers use as behavioral modifications to control student learning. In contrast, on the autonomous end of the continuum are those extrinsic motivators (e.g. providing choice, rationales and value for learning), which teachers can use to help their students internalize the reasons for learning. If teachers can demonstrate to students that what they are teaching them is worthwhile, meaningful, useful and important, the students will be more likely to engage in learning, even if they are not intrinsically interested in the topic or activity.

To promote and sustain intrinsic motivation and autonomous forms of extrinsic motivation, self-determination theorists argue that teachers need to satisfy students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. Students feel autonomous when they are free from coercion, have the ability to make decisions, and are encouraged to develop their values, goals, and interests (Assor, 2012). Students experience competence when they believe they have control over their ability to learn and that they can be effective in mastering challenges (Dweck, 2007). The need for relatedness refers to the students' need for warm, caring relationships with others in the classroom, including their peers and their teachers (Pianta, et al., 2012). When supportive learning contexts satisfy these needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, students develop a motivational foundation from which high-quality classroom engagement and positive school functioning can emerge (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Reeve, 2012; Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Self-determination theorists identify students' inner motivational forces and offer teachers recommendations for instructional strategies that can activate these internal motivational forces to facilitate high-quality student engagement (Niemic & Ryan, 2009).

### **Revisiting Methodology**

For this investigation into student engagement in social studies, I used a qualitative multiple case study design. Case study design allowed me to explore a contemporary phenomenon (two cases of student engagement in social studies), within its real-world context (two social studies classrooms), using a variety of data sources (interviews, observations, focus groups, reflections, a survey, and student work samples). I selected The Gateway School (pseudonym) as my research site because of its reputation for offering “progressive,” “experiential,” “hands-on,” “project-based,” learning opportunities for its students. Not only was the Gateway School a “reputational case,” but because my son attends the school, it was also a “local knowledge case.” I had “intimate knowledge and ample opportunity” for informed and in-depth analysis into student engagement (Thomas, 2011, p. 514).

The teacher participants for this study were eighth grade social studies teacher Lisa Randall (pseudonym), and eleventh grade American Studies History teacher Emmett Blackwell (pseudonym). Six of Lisa’s students and six of Emmett’s students volunteered to participate and provide a critical perspective on student engagement. I began data collection in September 2014 with one-hour semi-structured interviews with each teacher participant. Classroom observations started the following week; for approximately 16 weeks, I observed and audio taped (and later transcribed) each classroom. Through extensive field notes, I noted teacher and student interactions with academic work and with one another to gather evidence of the teacher’s support of students’ needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness.

In addition to interviews and observations, I conducted three focus group sessions with each group of students. Each focus group addressed a theme or a specific topic related to the research question. I also developed an online survey to give students a vehicle to anonymously share their perceptions about how they engage (or disengage) in learning social studies. The most

revealing evidence from the online survey came from the students' free response comments following each multiple-choice question. While the focus groups provided me with a great deal of insight into student perceptions of their engagement, anonymous online written reflections could have provided an additional, perhaps more candid assessments, of student engagement in social studies.

The teachers' reflections on their lessons were also integral to the study. Vignettes, or "composites that encapsulate what the researcher finds through the fieldwork" (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Ansul, 1997, p.70), served several purposes; they provided a springboard for the teachers' deep reflections on their lessons, a means for the teachers to confirm the accuracy of my interpretations of the lessons, and a vehicle to make student engagement "visible" for my readers.

To help me make sense of my large and varied body of data, I utilized qualitative content analysis (QCA), a research method for describing the meaning of qualitative material through a systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh, 2005; Schreier, 2012). I turned to both theory and my data to develop a coding framework to guide my analysis. My main categories – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – drawn deductively from self-determination theory, became the lenses through which I examined and analyzed how teachers promoted and sustained student engagement in social studies. For each of these main categories, I developed subcategories, gathered inductively from my data, to describe how teachers supported (or thwarted) their students' needs for autonomy, competency and relatedness in their social studies classrooms (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The qualitative nature of this study required that I substantiate the study's trustworthiness by integrating checks and balances throughout data collection and analysis. An intense and

prolonged exposure to classroom interactions, the multifaceted collection and representation of data and viewpoints, frequent member checks, researcher and participant collaboration and reflexivity, recognition and disclosure of researcher subjectivities, and an acknowledgement of the study's limitations, all enhanced the overall credibility and dependability of the case study.

## **Summary of Findings**

### **Students' Needs for Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness**

Through focus groups, work samples, observations and an online survey, the eighth and eleventh grade Gateway students who participated in this study provide great insight into what engages and disengages young people in learning social studies. The students in both age groups describe engaging learning activities using words like “fun,” “active,” “interesting,” “games,” “hands on,” “relates to the real world” and “relates to my life.” While the 8th grade students use terms like “gray area” and “thought-provoking” to describe engaging activities, the eleventh grade students use phrases like “open-ended questions” and “thinking for ourselves.” Throughout all of the focus groups, students consistently refer to engaging discussions “where everyone contributes,” and the ability to make “connections” as essential to maintaining their engagement. Both groups of students suggest that learning activities should be “challenging” but “not too hard,” and that they appreciate teachers who “help you understand” and “tell you what is important to know and do.”

In contrast, both groups of students express that they disengage in learning social studies when “textbooks are boring,” when they do not feel “comfortable,” when the material is “too difficult,” or when they are “too confused.” They “tune out” when the “lesson feels



disconnected” and they “don’t see the purpose of the activity,” when there is “no interaction,” or when they are “just sitting at the back of the room listening and doing nothing.”

When examined in isolation, these findings mimic the existing literature on student engagement and might not seem to offer anything new to a collective understanding of student engagement (Russell & Walters, 2010; Savich, 2009, Yazzie-Mintz & Carmichael, 2012). However, by examining these student-generated criteria for engaging learning activities in the broader context of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), a different perspective on student engagement in learning emerges. As students describe engaging social studies learning experiences, they reveal their needs for autonomy, competency and relatedness in the classroom.

By describing learning activities that are “fun,” “active,” “interesting,” “open-ended,” “hands on,” that allow them to “think about “gray areas,” help them “relate to the real world” and “relate to their lives,” the students essentially disclose their needs for autonomy. They engage in learning activities that give them control over their learning, that meet their internal desire to “think for themselves.” They are looking for ways to connect to the content – emotionally and cognitively, and they *want* to find the meaning, worth, and importance of learning social studies. However, when they do not see the purpose of activities, when lessons feel “disconnected,” or textbooks are boring, or when they are just listening and doing nothing, they disengage because, it would appear, the lesson has thwarted their internal desire to learn.

Likewise, students’ requests for activities that are challenging, but not too hard, speak directly to the students’ needs for competence. As self-determination theory suggests, and my data supports, students want their teachers to challenge them, but they need appropriate scaffolds as they take on these learning challenges. They also need their teachers to help them understand the content and tell them what is important to know. They “tune out” of learning when the work

is too difficult or when they are too confused, and they disengage when they do not understand the readings or the directions or how the teacher will evaluate their work. The more cognitively demanding the work, the more competence support the students demand, as Emmett's primary source document activity on the Mexican American War and his month-long exploration into Benjamin Franklin's autobiography illustrate.

Lastly, the students describe their need to feel comfortable and safe in their classroom in order to engage in discussions or suggest a lesson idea to the teacher. They crave interactions with their teachers and their classmates, and they describe "real discussions" as interactions during which everyone talks and shares opinions. They engage in learning when their teachers demonstrate a passion for teaching the subject and convey that they want their students to be successful. These descriptions of engaging learning experiences point to the students' needs for relatedness, which is the need to establish strong relationships with their teacher and peers in the classroom.

When examined through the lens of self-determination theory, the data clearly support the notion that to engage their students in learning, teachers need to help them internalize external reasons for learning content. Many well-intentioned teachers use tests, grades, college admissions, and other external controls such as homework passes, free time or pizza parties to convince students to engage in work. However, using extrinsic motivators does little to help students engage emotionally, cognitively, or behaviorally in learning (Dweck, 2008; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Self-determination theory directs teachers to discover strategies, not only to help students internalize the external reasons for learning, but also to support the students' needs to know they can succeed and to feel like they belong in the classroom. The findings of this study support the theory and research purporting that when teachers structure lessons to support

students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, their students are far more likely to engage in academic work, emotionally, cognitively and behaviorally, regardless of whether or not the students are intrinsically interested in learning.

### **In Search of Connections**

How might social studies teachers promote and sustain student engagement in learning activities? How might they help their students internalize external reasons for learning content? In Chapter One, I conceptualize student engagement in terms of what Yazzie-Mintz and McCormick (2012) describe as relationships:

In its most fundamental sense, engagement is about relationships. Whether two people choose to become “engaged” by embarking on a permanent and intimate relationship, or two forces “engage” in battle by entering a violent and confrontational relationship, the necessary component of “engagement” is a relationship. Engagement cannot be achieved or accomplished by oneself (p. 746).

Conceiving of engagement in terms of relationships allows me to conceive of student engagement in social studies in terms of the relationships the students develop in the classroom – with social studies curriculum and instruction, and with their peers and teachers. The students and teachers do not use the word *relationships* to describe their engagement; however, they do use the word *connections* consistently and extensively throughout the study. Through the process of qualitative content analysis, I found that, in the context of this study, relationships and connections were interchangeable. Yazzie-Mintz and McCormick's (2012) description of engagement could just as easily have read: “In its most fundamental sense, engagement is about connections.” Like relationships, connections cannot be achieved or accomplished alone.

Thus, I turn to the idea of connections to answer my research question. I argue that when teachers develop curriculum and instruction that fosters and strengthens students' connections to the curriculum content, to their success, to their peers, and to their teachers, they are able to shift their students' motivation to learn from external and controlled to internal and autonomous. Conceptualizing engagement in terms of connections allows me to "make visible" how teachers can support students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, and thus their engagement, in academic work.

### **Connections to Social Studies Content**

If autonomy refers to the "psychological need to experience behavior as emanating from and as endorsed by the self" (Reeve, 2012, p. 153), then supporting student autonomy means finding ways to help the students to endorse or "buy into" why social studies learning is important and worthwhile. In contrast, when students feel externally controlled or coerced into learning, they feel disconnected from the content. As Nicole explains, "I think if you have too much of just you finding the information on your own, or if you just have someone telling you that information there is a disconnect there, the information just becomes a series of facts rather than something that you can relate to and figure out on your own terms" (Appendix E.4, 49-53). While Lisa and Emmett present different types of academic work, provide different styles for discussions and small group work, and maintain very different purposes for teaching American history, both teachers find ways to support students' self-determination in learning social studies.

Throughout my research study, I observed many types of classroom interactions that foster different types of connections. Teachers help students form *emotional connections* to the content by providing experiences that are fun, shocking, unusual, or that allow for movement.

For example, when describing the assembly line simulation, students in both grades use words like “they got into it,” “afraid,” “cool,” “caught off guard,” “really fun,” and “got a basic feeling.” These descriptions connote emotions such as fear, surprise, enthusiasm and joy. The students in both eighth and eleventh grades describe their prior experiences with games and simulations such as the assembly line, the Civil Rights Dinner Party, “living under legalism,” or investing during the Gilded Age as engaging because these activities were interesting, fun and different. As Nicole notes, “when it is a project or a lesson that is fun, I think that is something that we gain knowledge from” (Appendix E.4, 175-176). In addition to simulations, Lisa and Emmett use provocative images, videos, music, movement (e.g. in small group work and during the interactive timeline activity), and “fun facts” to promote emotional and visceral reactions to the content.

Teachers may also support their students’ autonomy by providing them with opportunities to respond personally to social studies content. When students can *connect personally* to a text, image or document, they become more invested in their learning. Jennifer shares, “If it has some type of personal connection, you can apply it while the teacher is talking about the topic in class” (Appendix E.4, 218-220). Nicole suggests that while some people might just learn from memorizing the facts, “for me, it helps if I can connect it back to my own values or my own experiences” (Appendix E.4, 218-223). Lisa and Emmett use prompts such as “How might you have responded?” and “What do you think is interesting or important to know about this?” to help the students engage more autonomously. In addition, Lisa uses thinking routines like *3-2-1* and *See, Think, Wonder* (Ritchhart et al., 2012) to encourage her students to form personal connections to the content.

Closely related to having students respond personally to the content is the notion of *choice*. Personal responses are about making connections to content while choice is about having control over one's learning; yet both can support student autonomy. When projects are too rigid or scripted, as in the eighth grade Fishbowl deliberation or in the eleventh grade Mexican War comic strip project, the students disengage because they are no longer acting autonomously in their learning. In these examples, the teachers diminish their students' initiative and decision-making ability by controlling too much of the learning experience. The autonomy support provided by projects, rather than the projects themselves, seems to be an important factor in igniting student engagement. The eighth graders appreciate the ability to choose their "civil rights activists" because they are able to form personal connections to "their people" (Appendix E.3). The eleventh grade students welcome being able to choose their topics for their 100-Years writing projects; however, they are disappointed that they all have to write 8-10 page papers rather than being able to choose how to present their topics. In both the eighth and eleventh grade classes, students are more engaged in their learning when their teachers encourage them to take ownership over their learning and respond personally to the content.

Another way that teachers help students connect to the content is through whole class and small group discussions. The students seem to demand opportunities to connect to social studies content through "real" discussions where "everyone talks." The opportunity to hear everyone's opinions and to "learn from your friends" motivates the students to want to learn. For example, Pamela notes that the most engaging part of the Civil Rights Dinner Party was that "you had to make those connections with all of the other dinner party people." Yet, because Marie was unable to find commonalities with the other dinner party people, she notes, "I just felt very disconnected" (FG 3, 121). Later in this chapter, I explore in depth the role that discussions can

play in engaging students in social studies learning. More specifically, I examine how teachers may structure discussions to support student autonomy, competence and relatedness.

While facilitating emotional, personal and social connections to the content can promote student engagement in learning, when Lisa and Emmett challenge students to “think for themselves” and make *cognitive connections* to the content, the students become more animated and interested. For example, in their lessons on the Civil Rights Movement (eighth grade) and on slavery (eleventh grade), Lisa and Emmett activate their students’ previous knowledge on those topics and then introduce new information that challenges the students to reconsider what they thought they know. At the end of the units, both teachers challenge their students to confront and question their prior knowledge on the topics and to consider how their thinking has changed (e.g. Lisa uses the thinking routine “*I Used to Think, Now I Think*,” Emmett holds a class discussion). By helping the students to become aware of how their understanding of these topics changed, Lisa and Emmett support their students’ need to find purpose and worth in learning activities, and they give their students a compelling reason to think. Implied in this type of autonomy-supportive strategy is the need for teachers to find out what their students already know about social studies topics. By uncovering the students’ misconceptions and assumptions about topics like civil rights or slavery, teachers can develop lessons to cause changes in thinking about important concepts. When students become aware of their changes in thinking, they perceive that they are in control of their learning. They also know that their teacher cares about what they think and what they have learned.

To further support student autonomy, Lisa introduces her students to the process of moral and ethical decision-making and challenges them to apply that process to historical and present-day dilemmas. Lisa asked them to consider: What is the dilemma? What are our options? What

dilemma paradigms does each option address (i.e. truth vs. loyalty, justice v. mercy, short-term vs. long-term, and individual vs. community)? What values should guide our decisions (i.e. honesty, responsibility, fairness, respect and compassion)? How should we decide? What are the potential consequences of those decisions? Lisa's students describe resolving current and historical dilemmas as "challenging," "highly engaging" and "impactful." Caesar notes that he likes coming back to the moral and ethical dilemmas throughout the year "because you have to dig deeper into it," and always coming back to them "gives you a greater understanding" (Appendix E.1).

Lisa and Emmett make an effort to support their students' autonomy by challenging them to confront their misconceptions, to make decisions about ethical dilemmas, and to figure out what was going on in history through primary source documents (e.g. eleventh grade Mexican War documents or eighth grade *With Drops of Blood*). However, the most prevalent strategy that both teachers use to engage their students is helping them to form *connections across time (then and now) and place (here and there)*. In fact, the students demand these connections, as Nicole notes, "When he [Dr. B] talks about race relations during WWII, they may have happened around the same time, but you don't get the sense that they are connected. I am sure that he will talk about how they are connected, but I think it is harder to make that connection. It is harder to show that things can be simultaneously important" (Appendix E.6, 175-178). In the "then and now" type of connection, Lisa and Emmett try to convey the relevance and importance of history by showing students how the curriculum content (then) connects to current events or to the students' lives (now). Consider the following examples of "then to now" connections taken from transcripts of classroom observations, interviews and classroom documents:



- The Brooklyn Bridge is a metaphor for the industrial revolution (then) as [Google, or the iPhone, or the Internet, etc.] is a metaphor for the technological revolution (now). (Brooklyn Bridge Paper Assignment)
- “When we get to prohibition (then), we think about why do I need to know about this, but then we talk about drugs and the legalization of marijuana (now).” (Appendix C.1, 193-196)
- “How do you know that your chicken or your cheeseburger (now) wasn’t made in a slaughterhouse like the ones you just showed us in your presentation?...Do you still think the muckrakers were not important?” (then) (Appendix A.2, 113)
- “Do people immigrate to the United States today (now) for the same reasons that they immigrated in the late 1800s (then)? (Appendix A.9, 37-38)
- “Let’s look at the idea of imperialism (then)...Of all of the stuff that we have studied, this probably has the most immediate connection to the world that you guys are going to be living in. When you finish high school and move on to other things... a lot of what you will hear about the problems in the world today whether it is poverty, starvation and disease in Africa or whether it is unrest in the Middle East, all of that goes back to this idea of imperialism. This is a huge, huge, big thing (now).” (Appendix B.5, 32-38)
- “The reason why I said that imperialism sort of worked in Hawaii (then), is that if you go to Hawaii today, the majority of people are profoundly and deeply patriotic, and they are really connected to the United States....What is bad to say in Hawaii is something like, ‘Back in the United States’...that is deeply insulting (now).” (Appendix B.5, 391-402)

I describe these types of connections as “building bridges” connections because the teachers help their students build bridges between different time-periods (“then and now”) or different regions during the same time-period (“here and there”). Lisa and Emmett provide students with “then

and now” and “here and there” connections to demonstrate to students why history content remains relevant today, that history is important and useful to learn because it helps us better understand the world around us today.

However, even if teachers could connect each unit of study to a current event or topic, each unit, topic, or event in the history curriculum would seem isolated from the other events, like a “connect the dots” picture with no lines. The students are still left wondering why they need to learn history. The teacher continues to move “from one time period to the next” (Appendix E.6, 133-137) offering students no real rationale for how the different units relate. Relying on current events to provide relevance and a “sense of the worthy” may also lead teachers into a trap. Students (and teachers) may only deem those subjects for which teachers can provide current events connections as important. For example, Lisa has trouble providing her students with clear connections to current events for World War I. Lisa also finds it difficult to find connections to imperialism because “the whole idea of imperialism is so foreign to them” (Appendix D.1, 449-454).

In addition, connecting individual learning activities or units to current events may not fully support student autonomy or help students internalize the meaning and worth of the learning. In the six “then and now” examples cited above, both Lisa and Emmett told their students why learning about history is important; however, the connections ended there. The students would just have to accept their teachers’ justification for history; no further inquiry was required. Even if teachers encourage their students to seek out their own present-day connections to historical topics, the connections are likely to be forced and superficial. When teachers rely on using current events to show *how history is still relevant today*, students do not have to actively construct their understanding or internalize “Why do I need to know this?”

To that end, teachers can cultivate their students' endorsement of the worth of learning social studies by connecting social studies content to *overarching themes, enduring questions and big ideas* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). When teachers convey the purposes and goals of social studies and connect their instruction to these big ideas, they seem to help their students understand how seemingly disparate pieces of content relate to one another. For Lisa, the purpose of learning history is to discover how choices and decisions by ordinary people have affected the course of history. "This is not just about content and knowledge, this is about decision-making and how decisions are made" (Appendix D.1, 533-34). Lisa hopes to tie her curriculum back to the idea of dilemmas and decision-making and choices in history. "I have been able to insert a running thread of life skills, of character development, of teaching the kids about having a moral compass. I start the year with ethics and I try to weave that through as we go" (Appendix C.1, 81-85). Eighth-grade student Scott has internalized her message, "I think that learning social studies is important because you learn about how to make decisions and about ethics and stuff" (Appendix E.1, 74-75).

For Emmett "...it all goes back to this American Studies thing. The whole point of the discipline is to understand how cultures work...everything I do is connected to this idea of 'How do you understand American culture?'" (Appendix C.2, 91-92). Emmett poses the question: "What is American about American culture?" to unify and provide a framework for his yearlong curriculum on American Studies History. Emmett also uses themes to tie the disparate units of study together. For example, he organizes the first semester around the question, "How did the 50 states come to exist?" and the second semester around the theme of "Race and Ethnicity in America." For Nicole, these themes provide an important "bridge to other topics" which makes learning more "educational" and Emmett's teaching more "intentional." Using the themes

provides “a purpose to move from one topic to the next,” which Nicole said is “important” (Appendix E.6, 133-137). Melinda notes that Dr. B makes big idea connections often. “In his notes, he makes a point and he circles it on the board and says, “This is a really big idea!” and he lets us know that there is a connection between these.”

As students develop a sense of how events connect through big ideas and patterns, learning becomes more “educational.” Regardless of whether history teachers choose to teach chronologically or thematically, the findings of this study strongly suggest that their students are actively seeking out connections that help them make sense of all of the seemingly unrelated content of history. Social studies and history teachers can help students internalize the purpose and worth of learning social studies by “teaching with intention” (Appendix E.6) and by weaving recurring processes such as moral and ethical decision-making, overarching questions (e.g. What makes American culture uniquely American?) and themes (e.g. race and ethnicity in America) throughout the course. These “big ideas” become the “threads” that connect for students the many and varied squares of the patchwork quilt of history.

The connections that demonstrate the greatest degrees of autonomy and engagement in learning for the focus group students are those that connect student learning to the *real world*. This finding is in keeping with other studies of student engagement, including Lam et al., (2012) who note that among six motivational instructional contexts (challenge, real-life significance, curiosity, autonomy, recognition & evaluation), providing students with real-life reasons for learning had the highest correlation with student engagement.

For example, Lisa’s guest speaker shares a powerful narrative on the threads of racism throughout U.S. history,” and he calls on eighth grade students to break the cycle of racism today. It is clear from the students’ journals and their focus group comments that they

internalized the value of learning about civil rights. Eleventh grade students, Beth, Melinda and Nicole, describe real-world connections as a two-step process; “the first connection” happens in the classroom, for example, when learning about the First Amendment or about the history of Europe. “The second step in the connection” happens, in the same example, when students debate current First Amendment cases with relatives or experience “ah-ha” moments on a trip to Europe. These connections “the teacher can’t do for you because it has to happen on your own” (Appendix E.4, 205-208). Essentially, to satisfy their needs for autonomy, to help students internalize the value, worth and importance of learning social studies, the students need to know, “Why do I need to know or do this?” and “How will I use what I am learning in the real world?”

When students are able to connect history content to ongoing or unresolved issues, or to larger themes and questions, they can begin to construct an understanding of why the past is important and worth studying (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). However, the focus group students did not seem content simply to discuss or write about these meaning-making connections. References to “the real world” seem to mean more to the students than just connecting the dots, recognizing patterns, or seeing how the past comes to life in the present. As the 11<sup>th</sup> grade students’ comments reveal, these students engage in learning when they can apply what they have learned to *experiences* that go beyond classroom learning. This type of learning supports the students’ autonomy because the students are actively seeking out experiences that allow them to make their own connections. Learning moves beyond getting a grade from a teacher on a project, beyond applying the decision making process to historical and current events, beyond learning how the map of the United States came to be, and beyond understanding what makes American culture uniquely so. The students in both focus groups describe engagement in learning when they can take what they have learned in class and do something with it.

## Connections to Success

Social studies teachers can foster their students' relationships with the content to help them internalize their motivation to learn social studies content. However, in keeping with self-determination theory, teachers will not be able to foster student engagement if the students do not feel competent as they pursue learning challenges, engage in discussions, connect content to big ideas or apply what they have learned in the real world. Not surprisingly, throughout the study, I found that as learning became more autonomous, the students required more competence support. Autonomy-supportive work challenges students to think, and challenging work requires more competence support.

For example, Emmett challenges his students to figure out: "Did President Polk want to go to war with Mexico?" and distributes a packet of primary source documents. The students struggle with this challenge; they share that the readings are difficult, and they are not quite sure what they are supposed to be looking for. Only a handful of students respond to Emmett's questions; I later found out that despite the fact that they did not understand the assignment, the students knew Dr. B would eventually go over everything in the end, so they were not too concerned about the difficulty of the readings (Appendix E.6).

Students who do not feel competent are less likely to take on difficult challenges. Autonomy and competence go hand-in-hand.

When teachers support students' needs for competence, they are essentially finding ways to help them connect to their success. To help students develop connections to success, for example, teachers may set high expectations through challenging work (e.g. Civil Rights Dinner Party and slave narratives), and provide clear directions and structures to show the students how to be successful in mastering those challenges (e.g. Brooklyn Bridge paper, slave narratives

paper). Students describe several instances when teachers are unclear in their expectations or when the readings are too difficult, such as with the eleventh grade Mexican War primary source document activity. When students are unsure of how to be successful, they disengage in learning (e.g. Fishbowl deliberation on Spanish American War). Likewise, as an eleventh grade student shares anonymously online, when students perceive that their teachers are not challenging them with rigorous work, they are unable to fulfill their natural desire to master challenges, and their motivation to learn dissipates.

In contrast, when students receive constructive feedback, for example through extensive teacher comments on papers, comments on student online reflections, emails to group members constructively evaluating their work, exit and entrance tickets, and inconsequential quizzes, the students feel more confident in their ability to be successful. In addition, when students are encouraged to reflect on their learning (e.g. 8th grade online journals, class meetings to debrief why the Spanish American War Fishbowl was a failure, meetings with learning specialists to discuss which study strategies worked or did not work, etc.), they engage more, emotionally, cognitively and behaviorally, even when they do not appear to be interested in the topic.

Interestingly, the eleventh grade students describe “making connections” as a strategy they use to help them learn. When I ask the students: “When you tell someone you are thinking, what kinds of things might actually be going on in your head?” Of the six students, five mention connections. The students’ answers include, “making connections,” “I’m connecting it back to what we’ve already learned,” “I’m making connections,” “I’m imagining it in a way that makes sense to me/that I can connect to” and “I am laying out what I already know, then making connections” (Appendix E.5). Emmett too notes the power of connections in scaffolding student learning. “Often on the one day we revisit what we did the previous day in class just so things are

connected, even if it's just for a few minutes, rather than starting class with a new lesson or topic" (Appendix C.2, 122-124). Thus, making connections is not just about helping students find value or meaning in the social studies content; it is also about students' satisfying their needs to feel competent as they pursue learning.

### **Connections to Teachers and Classmates**

Perhaps the most obvious application of the concept of *connections* to student engagement is in looking at how teachers connect to their students in the classroom. When students are not intrinsically interested in learning social studies content, as Melinda suggests in her quote that opens this chapter, they look to their teachers and classmates for reasons why they should find learning social studies interesting and meaningful. Research on student engagement in learning suggests that the connections teachers form with their students could be the most critical for engaging students in classroom learning (Pianta et al., 2012). If students feel rejected by their teachers, or if they believe that their teachers do not care if they succeed or fail, regardless of whether the teacher's learning activities are autonomy-supportive or competence-supportive, students are unlikely to exhibit high-quality engagement in learning (Pianta et al., 2012; Ryan and Deci, 2000).

However, teachers who provide their students with warmth and caring, and who model a passion for learning what social studies has to offer, are more likely to engage their students in learning (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). The Gateway students describe relatedness or *connectedness* in terms of teachers who were always encouraging them. They praise teachers who, as they describe, "never gave up on them," who make sure that "everyone is good," who "really know their history." These teachers take an interest in their students outside of the classroom by going



to their sporting or theatrical events, and establish a sense of community in the classroom. Thus, the connections that teachers develop with their students by showing them that they care about them are essential for engaging students in learning. When students feel isolated and disconnected from their teacher and their classmates, they are far less likely to participate in classroom discussions, to take risks asking questions, or to pursue challenging work (Dweck, 2006; Pianta et al., 2012).

### **Strategies for Engaging Young Adults in Social Studies**

Just as Spider Man casts out his web, each new connection propelling him forward, the Gateway students in this study appear intent to cast out webs in search of connections to the content, to each other and to their teachers. They actively seek out opportunities to find value and meaning in their learning, to find ways to be successful and to feel safe and cared for in their classrooms. The students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, and their desire to satisfy these needs, are evident in their discussions during focus groups and in their behaviors during classroom observations. In some cases, they note that their teachers effectively satisfied these needs by providing the necessary connections. In other cases, the students offer recommendations for how their teachers could more effectively support these needs.

One of the goals for this case study is to provide practical strategies that teachers can use to help their students internalize their motivation to learn and to willfully and actively engage in learning social studies. The chart in *Table 2* summarizes what I found when I examined how teachers supported students' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and thus their engagement, in learning social studies. The chart lists the students' needs (i.e. autonomy, competence or relatedness) and the various descriptors for each need. The next column describes

the types of connections, interactions, or relationships that the students sought. Drawing on my findings from Chapters 4 and 5, the next column in the chart lists the specific strategies that Lisa and Emmett use to meet their students' needs (Note: This list also includes strategies that their students recommend). The last column provides the relevant theory and researched-based support for using these strategies to meet students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness in the classroom.

### **Structuring Learning Activities to Support Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness**

The focus of this study is to examine how teachers can engage their students in learning social studies by supporting their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The findings of this study support self-determination theory and the literature on student engagement.

- Autonomy-supportive teachers give students choices and encourage their input into learning. They develop their curriculum and instruction around making connections for students. Perhaps most importantly, they help students come to appreciate the meaning, utility and importance of learning.
- Competence-supportive teachers provide students with the structures and supports they need to be successful as they pursue rigorous learning challenges. They set high expectations, provide clear directions and guidance, model successful work, provide frequent and constructive feedback, and encourage students to reflect on and be accountable for their learning. They emphasize mastery learning over grades and test scores, and they encourage collaboration over competition.

- Relatedness-supportive teachers form warm and caring relationships with their students, and they establish a culture of respect and trust in their classroom. They give students a voice in classroom decision-making and they communicate with their students openly and honestly.

When teachers support all three psychological needs, students can develop the type of autonomous motivation required to pursue the challenges and rigor of school learning.

Self-determination theorists conceptualize teachers' motivating styles along a continuum of internalization, which ranges from highly controlling to highly autonomy supportive (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Reeve et al., 2004). The more that teachers can help their students shift their motivation to learn, from external and controlled, to internal and autonomous, the more their students will engage in learning, emotionally, cognitively and behaviorally (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). The findings of this study suggest teachers can promote the internalization of extrinsic motivation, and thus promote student engagement, by supporting students' basic needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness.

*Figure 25* “makes visible” the internalization continuum as it applies to the motivating styles of social studies teachers. When students experience learning as fun and enjoyable, they may begin to internalize their learning. As they develop more personal and cognitive connections to the content, the students appear to engage more in learning; they choose to engage because they are having fun or experiencing something different. Teaching “with intention” (Appendix E.6, 137) allows students to see how different events connect to one another (e.g. muckrakers and FDA today), and that there is a reason for learning social studies. Beth knows her “teacher had succeeded” (Appendix E.4, 190) when she was able to use and fully appreciate what she learned in World History on her trip to Europe. Students will internalize their motivation to learn when they come to value the meaning, importance and utility of what they are learning in class.

Table 2. Summary of Findings on how social studies teachers can support students' autonomy, competency and relatedness.

Student needs	Type of Connection/ Relationship/ Interaction	How did history teachers engage students in learning activities?		Connections to Theory Case Study Propositions
Autonomy		8 <sup>th</sup> grade	11 <sup>th</sup> grade	
<b>Catch my attention</b> with fun activities that are “cool,” different, shocking, or interesting	<b>Emotional</b> Sensory Feelings Visceral Movement How does this make me feel?	Present images that provoke or catch attention, provide sensory experiences Play video or music Simulations that help students “feel” what historical moments were like (Assembly Line) Field trips (e.g. Civil Rights Museum) Allow students to move around the room Guest speakers	Present images that provoke or catch attention – but integrate activities to encourage students to think about those images Provide sensory experiences Play video or music Interactive timelines (allow for movement) Integrate fun facts	Hidi and Baird (1986): Situational interest is an emotional state triggered by specific features of a task or activity and can be fleeting (as compared to individual interest). Bergin (1999): Situational factors that can draw students' attention include: novelty, humor, games, role-plays, puzzles, suspense, and fantasy.
Encourage me to <b>respond personally</b> to the content.	<b>Personal or Self</b> What do you think? What questions do you have? What do you want to know? How might you have responded?	Thinking Routines: (i.e. “See, Think, Wonder”) Elicit student questions about content Encourage at-home family discussions Reflections – what do you think is important or interesting about this reading, movie, or speaker? Why do we need to know about this event or person or topic? What would you have done?	Convey history as a story – help students relate to the themes or “characters” Use historical literature on big theme or question (What makes Ben Franklin’s story more or less “American” than your family’s story?) Textbook reading – what do you think is important? Why do we need to know this?	Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000): Situational factors may spark interest, but the key to maintaining interest is in finding ways to empower students by helping them find meaning or personal relevance.
I need to feel like I have some <b>control</b> over what and how I learn & how I show what I know.	<b>Choice</b> How will you show what you know? Do you want to work alone or in a group? Which topic interests you the most?	Choice of project topics, assessments, test or essay questions Ask: What do you find interesting? Choose group members	Choice of project topics, assessments or test questions Choice of how to present content Ask: What do you find interesting? Work in groups or alone	While personal reactions are about making connections, giving students choices is about giving them control over their learning (Antonetti & Garver, 2015).

Provide me with opportunities to <b>interact and learn with my classmates</b> through an exchange of ideas.	<b>Social &amp; Interpersonal</b> What topic, problem or question will we discuss together? What text(s) will we use? How can we include everyone?	Discussions & debates around open-ended questions or issues “Is war ever justified?” “How can ordinary people bring about change?” Working in small groups Insure inclusiveness	Real discussions (everyone talks) Debates Small group discussions Controversial content encouraging multiple perspectives Open-ended questions: “Was reconstruction justice or revenge?” “Is this guy a hero or a villain?”	Students who perceive their teachers encourage interactions and classroom discussion report higher levels of emotional engagement (Wang & Holcombe, 2010)
<b>Challenge me to think for myself</b> about important current or historical decisions or dilemmas.	<b>Inquiry/ Figure it Out</b> Decision-making What is the dilemma? what our options and how do we decide?	Ask: “What makes you say that?” Teach and use decision-making process to resolve moral and ethical dilemmas (and apply process to historical dilemmas) Primary source document analysis (With Drops of Blood)	Primary source document analysis Ask: “What’s going on here?” Pose open-ended, provocative questions Promote cognitive dissonance – determine what students know or do not know and challenge them to look at content differently (e.g. Slavery and slave narratives)	Learning occurs as a result of our thinking and active sense making (Ritchhart et. al, 2012)
I need to know <b>why this is important.</b> I need you to hold my attention by showing me why I need to know this content or do this work.	<b>Building Bridges:</b> Then and now Here and there Big ideas Enduring questions How does this event connect to others? What do all of these events or people have in common?	Use current events – how does history help us to understand? Students investigate: Why is this historical event important today? (Muckrakers) Help students define concepts like “justice,” “democracy,” “revolution,” Integrate big idea questions “Is war ever justified?” or “To what extent have Americans fulfilled the promises laid out in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution?”	One Hundred Years project - “How did the United States change during the century?” Integrate big idea questions: “What is uniquely American about American culture?” Teach thematically: How did the map of America come to be? Race and ethnicity; the American frontier; post WWI foreign and domestic policy	The primary motivational issues facing teachers are about helping students come to appreciate the value of learning activities (Brophy, 2010) Open ended authentic questions that do not have not predetermined answers are extremely powerful in creating a classroom culture that feels intellectually engaging” (Ritchhart, Church & Morrison, p. 31)
I need to know how I will use social studies & history classroom learning in the real world	<b>Real World/ Authentic</b> How do adults use this in the real world? How will you use what you have learned to understand or appreciate the real world? How can I share what I learned with authentic audiences?	Guest speaker on combating racism today Encouraging and supporting student agency to affect change	Political science – How does the First Amendment apply to issues today? Students discuss with adults beyond the classroom. Students make their own connections during travel across the us and abroad. Students suggest projects should have students learn the content and then ask “Now so what?”	Perceiving class work to be authentic “contributes strongly to the engagement of all students” (Marks, 2000, p. 173) Authentic tasks are “meaningful, valuable, significant, and worthy of one’s effort” (Newmann et al., 1992, p. 23) Lam et. al (2012): Providing students with real-life reasons for learning had the highest correlation with student engagement.

Competence		8 <sup>th</sup> grade	11 <sup>th</sup> grade	Case Study Propositions
I need to feel like I am being challenged & that my teacher has high expectations for me, but I must also believe that I can be successful.	Challenge me	Encourage application and analysis levels of thinking Students look for patterns and connections through themes, conceptual attainment learning (e.g. Revolution, justice) and enduring questions (How can ordinary citizens bring about change? To what extent have we fulfilled the promises of the Preamble?)	Encourage students to reason with evidence, consider different viewpoints and perspectives; uncover complexity and go below the surface, identify patterns and make generalizations (see Chapter 5 for student examples) Consistent connections to enduring question: What is uniquely American about American culture?	“Student freedom to design or shape learning without a corresponding focus or commitment to increasing competence or without any kind of accountability to mastery or performance is unlikely on its own to lead to either behavioral engagement or learning” (Wang & Holcombe, 2010, p. 654). When students believed that they were capable of success when doing challenging academic work, they became more engaged in learning. (Lam et al., 2012)
I need my teacher to provide <b>clear expectations</b> of what I am supposed to do and learn	Be clear and explicit with what you want me to know and be able to do [aims and expectations]	Provide explicit directions, have students explain directions and clarify misconceptions Use graphic organizers Press students to insure they know what to do Explain to students the purpose for each learning activity Provide rubrics for final assessments at the beginning of units and review with students	Review end of chapter questions Highlight or bold key points, circle “big ideas” in notes Provide notes on board as a guide Provide flow to the class – each day, summarize what we did yesterday and what we will do tomorrow	The more teachers provided optimal structure and scaffolding during learning, and the more they assigned academic work at appropriate levels of difficulty, the more students engaged in academic work. (Lam et al., 2012)
I need my teacher to show me <b>what success looks like</b> and help me to be successful through guidance and support	Show me how I can be successful	Identify what skills and content students need to know to demonstrate mastery for each activity Predict areas of struggle Model success Demonstrate for students how to be successful Use visual structuring to focus students’ attention on aims	For more cognitively demanding work, model successful work Primary source document analysis – have students read at home, give guiding questions of what to look for, model for students how to analyze documents	When students seek to <u>develop</u> competence in the classroom (or mastery learning goals), the quality of cognitive, emotional and behavioral engagement will be higher than students who seek to <u>demonstrate</u> competence (or performance learning goals). Ames, 1990; Anderman & Patrick, 2012; Dweck, 2006
I need my teacher to <b>provide frequent &amp; constructive feedback</b> on how I am proceeding toward the learning aims	Give me frequent and constructive feedback In the form of formative assessments	Entrance and exit tickets (Andrew Young) Mini-inconsequential quizzes (WWI) Four corners (Where do you stand?) Constructive commentary Track student work on post-it easel pads Teacher comments on student online reflections	Give frequent “inconsequential quizzes” Provide extensive written feedback and commentary on homework and papers	Good feedback helps students understand where they are in their learning, and once they know what to do and why, most students develop a sense of competence or control over their learning, which is motivating. Brookhart, 2008

I need to <b>reflect</b> on my learning so I can be autonomous and accountable for my own progress	Encourage me to reflect on my learning and my progress	Students reflect on study habits and strategies Students develop plans for improvement Held accountable for successes and challenges	Set clear objectives at the beginning of the semester, no mystery in evaluation system	Costa & Kallick (2008) suggest that when students reflect on their learning, they experience a sense of control, make meaning and engage in complex learning.
<b>Relatedness</b>		<b>8<sup>th</sup> Grade</b>	<b>11<sup>th</sup> Grade</b>	<b>Case Study Propositions</b>
I need to know that my teacher cares about me	Show me that you care about me, in and out of the classroom	Attend students' activities Be a cheerleader for your students Greet students at the door Solicit student feedback and opinions on learning activities – what works or does not? Admit when lesson is not going well	Model a passion for learning history Focus on learning rather than on consequences and punishment Allow for movement Be sensitive to students' schedule Be flexible and fair	When teachers create warm and caring environments and support students both academically and socially, students are more likely to participate in academic work (Stipek, 2000; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). When teachers provide students with warm and caring social environments, support student perspectives & interests, & remain sensitive to students' needs, students report a greater sense of emotional engagement (Pianta et al., 2012; Valeski & Stipek, 2001).
Before I can participate freely in learning activities, I need to feel safe and respected by my teacher and classmates	Help me feel safe and respected in your classroom	No pop quizzes Frequent and open communication Students send encouraging emails to peers Students evaluate themselves as group members and contributors Teacher and students establish rules for interactions & directions	Allow students to choose how they participate	Teachers who encourage interaction and discussion within a supportive classroom environment help students experience a positive sense of relatedness among their peers. (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Student-teacher relationships are the vehicles through which classroom contexts engage developmental processes; thus, relationships with teachers and peers are the activators and organizers of students' needs for autonomy, competency and relatedness (National Research Council, 2004).

Often, social studies teachers turn to simulations, movies, games, role-plays, arts and crafts or multi-media projects to engage students in learning. Education catalogues such as *History Educator: Classroom Teaching Aids for Teachers, By Teachers* are replete with “fun” activities for engaging students in history like creating “Farce Book” pages for presidents, wireless game systems for playing Jeopardy!, “student-centered,” “thought-provoking” and “engaging” lesson plans on a variety of social studies topics (Teacher’s Discovery, 2015). However, the findings from this study suggest that student engagement in learning activities depends, not on whether the activity is fun or relates to students’ lives, but rather on the degree to which the student has internalized the value, importance and utility of what they are learning, and how the student perceives his competence and relatedness during the activity. In designing their curriculum and instruction, social studies teachers may pay careful attention to all three of these constructs – autonomy, competence and relatedness – as all three are required for student engagement. To illustrate this point, I examine one of the most potentially engaging activities social studies teachers may use: discussions. In the next section, I explore how Lisa and Emmett structure (or could more effectively structure) their discussions to support students’ autonomy, competence and relatedness and internalize students’ motivation to learn.



### Internalization Continuum of Extrinsic Motivation

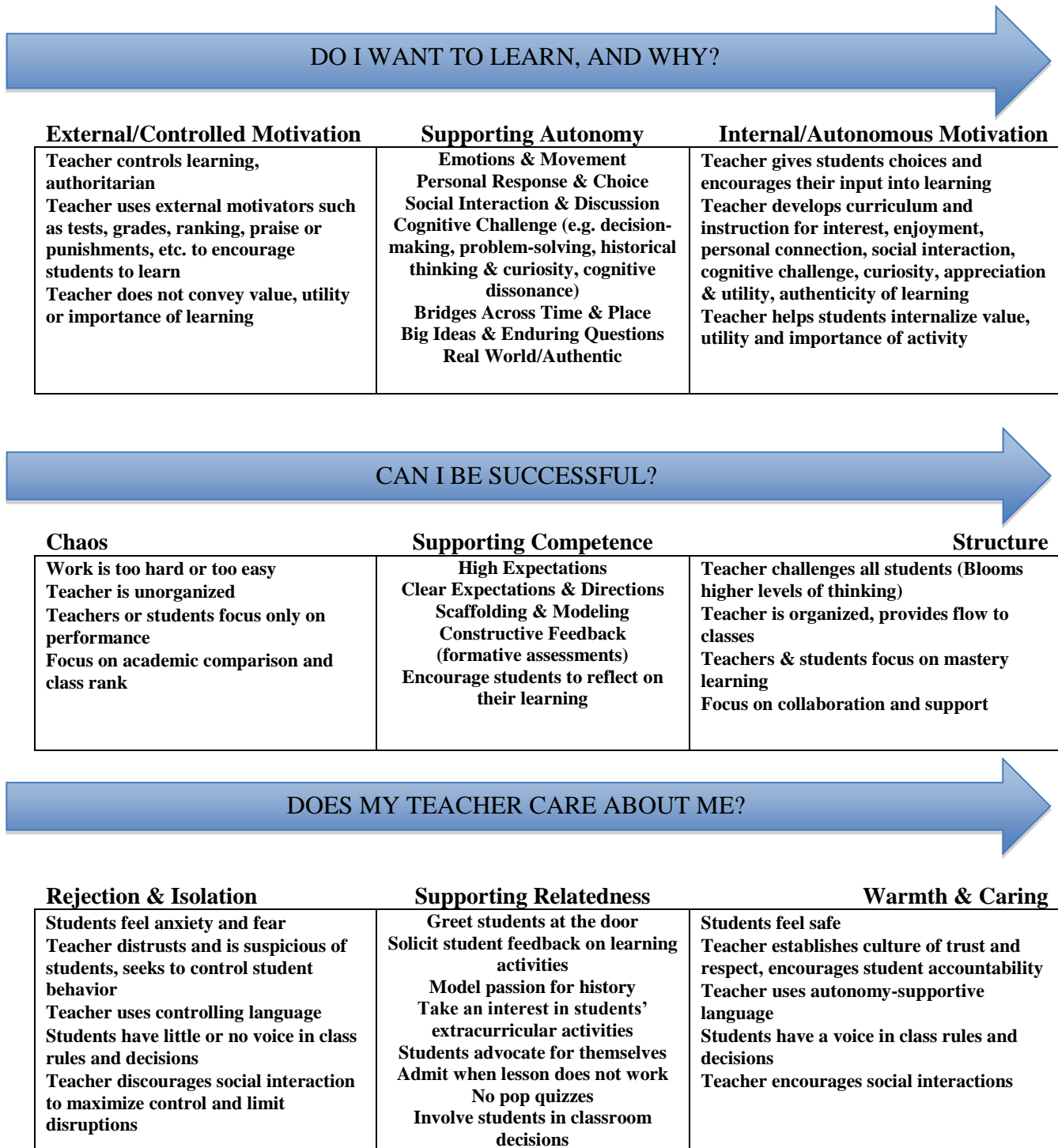


Figure 22. Internalization continuum applied to motivating styles of social studies teachers.

### **Structuring Discussions to Support Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness**

Much of the literature on student engagement in social studies recommends discussion-based learning activities to help students meet the aim of social studies education, or what Parker (2010) refers to as *enlightened political engagement* (Parker & Hess, 2001; Brookfield & Preskill (2005); Sullivan, Schewe et al., 2015). Facilitating classroom discussions would seem to be an effective way to engage students in learning social studies; after all, there is no doubt that young people are social beings. In their worlds outside of the classroom, they willingly and eagerly engage in discussions, whether in person, by phone, text, or email, or through any one of a long list of social media outlets. The pervasiveness with which young people *post, chat, poke, tag, friend, view* and *like* via social networking sites suggests that interactions and discussions are deeply embedded in our students' daily lives. This multiple case study demonstrates, however, that discussions that take place in social studies classrooms are not necessarily engaging for students. Despite the focus group students' interest in "discussion-based learning," they were quick to differentiate "real" discussions from other types of classroom talk. Whether or not the students choose to engage in and learn from discussions depended on how teachers structured those discussions to support students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness.

The following composite vignette draws on both the eighth and eleventh grade students' focus groups; I create a hypothetical roundtable meeting of both groups of students to illustrate those qualities of "real discussions" that engage students in learning social studies. For purposes of clarity, I italicize qualities of discussions that engage students and underline qualities that thwart engagement. Using this vignette as a reference, I examine how teachers might structure discussions to be more autonomy-, competence-, and relatedness-supportive.

**Scott** (8): What I like about social studies is that when we learn something, we discuss it, and then *you are learning from your friends*. It's like the *students are teaching each other*, not just the teacher teaching the students.

**Caesar** (8): I like when there is a *group conversation*, especially when it is a *long discussion* and *everyone is picked on*. I listen to someone say something and then someone responds or I respond, and *I share my own opinions*. I feel very engaged in that.

**Melinda** (11): Yeah, real discussions *include everyone*. I feel like if you are having a real discussion, *you get to relate things* and *you get to hear everyone's opinion on it*.

**Nicole** (11): I agree. In a real discussion, *everyone gets a chance to talk*. I feel like so often our teacher asks us a question and only a couple of people answer. I don't consider that a real discussion, especially when it is the same people answering every time.

**Emma** (11): I really like *how everybody has their own opinions and perspectives* on things instead of being one-sided. Instead of teaching kids to be one-sided, he *helps us to form opinions* and *get different perspectives*.

**Terrell** (8): Does everyone remember when we were studying the Spanish American War, and we had that Fishbowl discussion? It wasn't really a discussion, it was just us listing facts. I mean there was no counter or objection! You are wrong because of blank!

**Caesar** (8): *If we could have had a rebuttal*, it would have made it so much better. I love debates!

**Pamela** (8): Oh, I love debates too! But during the Fishbowl, it was really hard for the outside group to stay engaged in the conversation because they just had to listen. It is like any type of social situation, if you are on the outside, you are not going to be paying attention. I think the Fishbowl would have been *a lot more interesting if we had all been*

*on two panels facing each other. Each group would state their categories and then the other side would have been able to ask us questions right away. Instead of just having a conversation with our group, it would be both sides facing each other.*

**Sol:** I think it is *important to face each other* too. When we read Benjamin Franklin, we *put the chairs around in a circle without the big tables*. I feel like that is a better way to have a real discussion because *we are all looking at each other* and you are not distracted and you know the teacher is watching you. *So, you are focused and you are ready to give your input*. When you are at your table, you can be doing something else. I think it would be better if we put the chairs in a circle and have no tables just chairs and have everyone talking about the topic. (Appendix E.6, 197-203)

**Christie (11):** I agree. I kind of link discussion with debates. In world history, there were more *opportunities to agree or disagree with your classmates*. My teacher would assign you a side, for example, one side had to defend Christopher Columbus and what he did and the other side had to defend why he was wrong. In American History, it is not similar to last year because there really isn't a debate. For example, if we are having a discussion around slavery, no one is going to argue that slavery was good. No one would ever say that. Everyone would say that slavery is horrible and unacceptable. I guess in World History there were *more opportunities to agree or disagree with your classmates*. In American History, it's like we are all on one side. (Appendix E.6, 242-251)

**Emma (11):** I think that discussions depend on how comfortable you are with everything. I know a lot of people are more comfortable discussing their opinions when it is a smaller group because there are not a lot of people judging their answers. I think it depends on

the person whether they feel comfortable speaking out in a larger group setting.

(Appendix E.6, 252-256)

**Beth** (11): *I love class discussions* and I am pretty particular about them. To me, this is a discussion, what we are doing here. Maybe it is just me, but *I like to talk and participate in stuff like this*, but even when we weren't discussing Ben Franklin, when we were discussing something else, I just kind of feel uneasy in his discussions. I don't know why. I just get really squirmy. I don't really feel comfortable. (Appendix E.6, 224-228)

**Sol** (11): Sometimes I don't participate in discussions because I take some time to process the question and take time to organize my thoughts and how I want to say the answer. I try to get it as accurate as possible because sometimes I question myself and wonder if this is right. I think to myself that maybe you should hold off on that and see if you are right.

**Beth** (11): So maybe going into smaller groups would be good, but it is also for *the teacher to know that everyone is good*. All I know is telling high schoolers to get into a small group to discuss something that is like totally irrelevant to their lives is like really tough. Our teacher will say, ok, talk to your table about something, and we will all just start talking about something else. (Appendix E.6, 230-234)

When viewed together in one dialogue, the students' descriptions of "real discussions" provide great insight into how teachers might support students' autonomy, competence and relatedness in discussions.

Young people connect emotionally to social studies content during discussions because they enjoy interacting with their peers. Student interest and enjoyment in discussions was evident in both the focus group sessions and my observations. In addition, as Caesar and Melinda note,

young people love to share their opinions. When teachers encourage students to respond personally to social studies topics, issues or questions, they promote the students' engagement in learning, at least emotionally and behaviorally. The students especially appreciate it when their teachers ask them questions like "What do you think is important or interesting about this topic?" or "What do you think you would have done in that situation?"

One theme that is common to both focus groups is the students' insistence that in real discussions, "everyone gets a chance to talk." This desire to hear from everyone suggests that students connect to the content when they can socially construct their understanding of that content with their classmates. Students look to discussions, not only to provide interactions with their classmates in ongoing exchanges in which everyone "shares opinions," but also to clarify their own ideas and beliefs about topics, especially when the focusing question is open-ended. They not only enjoy interacting with their classmates, but they also appreciate the exchange of ideas, as Scott notes that he likes social studies because you get "to interact with and learn from your friends, and not just the teacher."

The students' preference for debates offers another clue for social studies teachers who are looking for ways to help students internalize their motivation to learn. Christy says that she prefers World History to American History discussions because in World History, "there were many different sides," and in American History, "we are all on the same side." While some students might enjoy the competition inherent in debates, it seems that what students find most engaging about debates is the opportunity to actively deliberate multiple perspectives on issues – as Pamela suggests, "with both sides facing each other." Real discussions, as Christy explains, are organized around open-ended questions ("when there is more than one side"). Such deliberations invite the students to examine multiple ways of looking at complicated and

controversial issues. They can eventually decide for themselves with which perspective(s) they most agree or they can come up with their own perspective. A question like, “Was Columbus a hero or a villain?” pushes students to weigh evidence and think for themselves. As Terrell and Caesar’s call for objections and counters in discussion suggest, students engage in learning when history is cast as interpretation; thus lending support to the notion that one key to engaging students in learning social studies is that the students feel autonomous.

When students are acting autonomously during discussions, they are actively participating (as opposed to “sitting in the back of the room, taking notes and doing nothing”), sharing opinions, listening to their classmates’ opinions and forming their own perspectives on controversial issues. When teachers organize discussions around important questions and big ideas (e.g. Is war ever justified? Or Was Reconstruction justice or revenge?), students like Christy are more likely to willingly engage in learning because they believe the discussion is not only fun and interesting, but also important and meaningful. While Beth reminds us that discussions on topics that are “totally irrelevant” are tough, theory and research on student motivation suggests that the students do not need to be intrinsically interested in social studies content, they just have to internalize the value of that learning (Brophy, 2010).

The students’ comments about discussions speak directly to their needs for autonomy in learning social studies; they do not want to passively receive content and information from their teachers. Instead, they want to actively seek out and develop their understanding of the topic by discussing what it all means with “everyone in the class.” However, to support the students’ autonomy as they engage in “real discussions,” teachers also need to structure their discussions for student success and competence. Students will not participate in discussions if they are unsure of what the teacher expects from them (eighth grade Montgomery bus boycotts, eleventh

grade Ben Franklin biography), if the text is too difficult, or if they do not have enough time to prepare their comments (11th grade Mexican American War). In addition, while teachers' support for student autonomy is important, Wang and Holcombe (2010) conclude that it is not sufficient to bring about behavioral engagement in academic work. "Student freedom to design or shape learning without a corresponding focus or commitment to increasing competence or without any kind of accountability to mastery or performance is unlikely on its own to lead to either behavioral engagement or learning" (Wang & Holcombe, 2010, p. 654).

Teachers may support students' needs to be successful during discussions, for example, by clearly establishing the purpose of the discussion, setting high expectations and providing clear directions regarding the format and procedures for the discussion. To encourage students who are hesitant to participate in discussions, teachers may provide organizers like the "Civil Rights Dinner Party" placemats, or "entrance tickets," which could include students' notes on the readings, references to page numbers in the text and questions to ask their classmates and their teachers. In addition, in order to help their students clarify their understandings and their responses during discussions, teachers may continually ask, "What makes you say that?" (Ritchhart et al, 2012). Students would then need to point to the text or to evidence that supports their answers. Requiring that students defend their opinions with evidence can avoid what Roby (1988) refers to as "bull sessions."

The composite vignette also illustrates that the students want their teachers to structure discussions in ways that they can be successful. For example, Nicole contrasts real discussions with discussions during which only a handful of the same students answer the teacher's questions; "That is not a real discussion." Roby (1988) refers to this type of classroom talk as a "game show" discussion, during which students are trying to guess the one right answer in their



teacher's head. Sol does not participate in "game show" discussions because she fears she might say the wrong answer. In contrast to game show discussions, teachers might use discussion formats such as seminars (interpretive discussions) and deliberations (discussions about issues on which action is needed) (Parker & Hess, 2001, p. 274). At the heart of seminars is the notion of shared inquiry. Shared inquiry suggests that all of the students in the class read, write and talk with one another about a common text, which may include, for example, an excerpt of a speech, the preamble to the U.S. Constitution, songs, court cases, paintings, political cartoons, events, performances and controversial issues. Parker and Hess (2001) suggest that the teacher poses an opening question that focuses the students' attention on a central problem or idea. For example, although Emmett was unable to get to this discussion in class, he intended to ask students, "Was reconstruction justice or revenge?" Lisa wanted her students to examine the events of the Spanish American War to consider, "Is war ever justified?" While both teachers identify opening questions and intend to conduct a shared inquiry, neither was certain about how to structure the discussion, what texts would be most appropriate, or how to help the students understand the multiple perspectives on these complex questions.

Several of the "discussions" I observed in both classrooms, it seems, would have benefitted from what Walter Parker and Diana Hess (2001) refer to as "teaching both with and for discussion." Parker and Hess (2001) suggest that educators teach with discussion because it can be an effective strategy to engage students in learning and decision-making, but they also argue that educators teach their students, through scaffolding and modeling, how to participate effectively in discussions. In addition, by soliciting feedback from students on how to improve discussions, and by encouraging students to reflect on how they might become better discussion participants, teachers may encourage their students to learn, both with and for discussion. When

students are unsure of what effective discussions look or sound like, it is unlikely they will engage in those discussions.

Real discussions, when structured as Parker and Hess (2001) recommend, can support students' autonomy by fostering shared inquiry around a shared text and a shared question or issue. Yet, Emma reminds the roundtable group that underlying all successful discussions is each student's need to feel safe and respected by his/her peers and teachers. During my observations of both classes, it became quickly apparent which students were comfortable contributing to class discussions and which students were not. While eleventh graders Melinda, Nicole and Emma share frequently in class and small group discussions, their classmates Sol, Christie and Beth rarely ever raise their hands. Their heads are often down in their notes, seemingly trying to avoid direct eye contact with Emmett. Although teachers can support students' autonomy by providing opportunities for them to interact with their classmates through discussions around important and controversial issues, students will not engage in learning if they do not feel like they can be successful or if they do not feel comfortable participating in class.

Sol admits that she often does not contribute to class discussions because she is afraid to be wrong in front of her teacher and classmates. Marie says she enjoys discussions, but she quickly shuts down when her teacher interrupts her. Marie also becomes discouraged during the Civil Rights Dinner Party when she does not feel connected to the other activists at the table. She is unsure of where she fits in to the discussion and thus is not as engaged as she would have liked. Perhaps if Lisa had provided an opening question (e.g. "Are some strategies for "establishing justice" or "insuring domestic tranquility" more or less effective than others?" a common purpose to the conversation (e.g. Make a list of strategies for bringing about change and rank in terms of effectiveness), and additional scaffolding and modeling, Marie would have

understood better where she (playing the role of her activist) fit into the larger picture. Unlike Marie, Beth was not able to verbalize the reason for her “squirminess” during discussions in Emmett’s class; however she noted that it was important that her teachers know that “everyone is ok” in the class.

Teachers might structure discussions to support students’ needs to feel safe, connected to and respected by the others in the classroom by involving students in establishing rules for civic discussions. In addition, the students suggest that their teachers have them first discuss topics in small groups where students feel safer to contribute. Once students have had a chance to test out their contributions in a small group, the teacher can bring students together as a large group. Other strategies, such as using backchannel technologies like Today’s Meet (TodaysMeet.com) can provide shy students with a format to contribute to group discussions without having to speak out in front of classmates.

Both Lisa and Emmett admit that facilitating “real discussions” is difficult. Emmett wants to get everyone “sucked in” to the discussion, but he is mindful that some students are shy or timid. He does not want to “force anyone to speak more than they are comfortable” (Appendix D.4, 132). Emmett also recognizes that several of his students are quick to respond and they can often monopolize the discussion. When recalling one successful discussion about *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, Emmett suggested that perhaps that discussion was more inclusive and productive because there was a “more democratic type of situation because everyone was reading the same book and they had the same level of knowledge and understanding” (Appendix D.4, 125-129).

In this sense, Emmett recognizes what experts in facilitating classroom discussions argue are effective discussions: “a text-based, shared inquiry of the listening-and-talking kind. A group

of inquirers is presented with a well-chosen text, a focusing question, and a purpose” (Parker and Hess, 2001, p. 275).

Emmett understands the power of controversial questions to engage students in discussions. He says that he often tries to set the kids up for discussions by assigning for homework questions like, “Is this guy a hero or a villain?” or, “Was this event harmful or helpful to the country?” “I just give them something where there is a choice and there is not a clear right answer, and then just sort of let it go from there” (Appendix D.6, 110-113).

Teachers might also support their students’ need to interact and learn from one another by paying particular attention to the physical layout of their classrooms. Many times throughout my observations, I note that the physical layout of large round tables and chairs in Emmett’s classroom seemed to impede whole classroom discussion. The round



*Figure 23.* Physical layout of Emmett’s room is not always conducive to whole class discussions.

tables may facilitate small group discussions; however, when it comes to whole class discussions, the round tables allow too many students to tune out, literally turning their backs on their classmates. In the vignette above, Sol suggests that getting rid of the round tables and just having chairs in a circle supported whole class discussions on the Benjamin Franklin readings. Sol, like Pamela, notes the importance of “looking at each other” during discussions. While teachers often do not have control over the physical restrictions of their classrooms, they may

want to try to organize their rooms to support different types of discussions and interactions. Sol suggests that “all looking at each other” is important for whole class discussions. Nicole notes that the small round tables are more effective for small group discussions. Teachers may try to configure their desks and chairs specifically to facilitate rather than impede whole class and small group discussions.

Lisa’s concerns about facilitating “real discussions” are not necessarily about getting everyone to talk, but that the students too often share their opinions without backing them up with evidence. There are discussions, for example, during the discrimination lesson, when students appear engaged and everyone is talking, but Lisa believes she is not getting good responses from the students. She later questions whether she spent too much time on the activity without ensuring students actually came away with new ideas.

When teachers pose the question, “What makes you say that?” it forces students to back up their opinions with evidence from the text or with what they have learned in class. While I did not observe the moral dilemma activities in Lisa’s classroom, such discussions based on ethical issues challenge students to make decisions about important and controversial issues for which there are no right answers. The 8<sup>th</sup> grade students note that the moral and ethical dilemma discussions are among the most challenging activities they encountered in Lisa’s class.

The students in both cases engage in learning when they have opportunities to share their opinions and agree or disagree with their classmates on important issues. In both cases, real discussions require that all students are comfortable sharing their opinions, that they support their opinions with evidence, and that the students know what their teachers expect of them. That is a tall order for social studies teachers who may not know how to facilitate “real discussions.” The

findings of this study suggest that to support students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness during discussions, teachers should:

- Establish clear and high expectations for discussions;
- Present students with a common text, a common question, and a common purpose
- Select the best discussion format for the discussion purpose (i.e. seminar, deliberation, debate, or conversation)
- Insure that questions are provocative and have multiple and competing answers;
- Give students sufficient time to read, digest and annotate the text in small chunks;
- Provide formative and summative feedback on students' analysis of the readings; scaffold student comprehension when necessary;
- Encourage students to provide and evaluate textual evidence to support their claims;
- Provide opportunities for everyone to contribute to the discussion;
- Create a “culture of safety” where students can take risks; have students share in creating the rules for discussion;
- Organize the physical space to allow for eye contact and focus;
- Encourage student reflections on how to improve class discussions.

Effective discussions can prompt students' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness and thus foster effective engagement and increased meaningful learning. The many positive implications for implementing engaging discussions in the social studies classroom make learning how to effectively conduct discussions well worth the effort.

### **Implications of this Study**

How might social studies teachers engage young people in academic work? The question guiding this study has vexed social studies educators for more than a century. The 1916 Report of the Social Studies Committee proposed “a greater emphasis on the needs and interests of students” (Evans, 2004, p. 21). In 1938, John Dewey suggested that teachers present content to students as “immediate problems, which also happened to have historical significance” (Fallace, 2010). Also in the 1930s, Harold Rugg developed a curriculum around real social problems of the time (Kliebard, 2004). The New Social Studies in the 1960s and the Newer Social Studies movement in the 1970s sought to engage students in doing authentic work as social scientists. Oliver, Shaver and Newmann (1967) developed their Public Issues Series (1967) units around investigations and deliberations of controversial public issues (Bohan & Feinberg, 2008 ). More recently, problem-based, inquiry-based and project-based learning advocates promote their methods to engage students in meaningful and worthwhile social studies learning.

Underlying these social studies curriculum reforms, presumably, is the understanding that students engage in learning social studies when they can make decisions about moral and ethical issues, solve problems, learn to think and act like historians, geographers, anthropologists, economists or political scientists, investigate and deliberate controversial issues, and examine the past in the context of the present. The current study’s findings on what engages young people in learning social studies echo what education reformers have known for more than a century: that students engage in learning, not just because the learning is fun or interesting, but because it is meaningful, worthwhile, and useful in the real world. Young people engage when they can think for themselves, deliberate with their peers, and learn how to make informed decisions about important problems and issues, for which there are multiple and competing answers. So then,

what implications does this study have for the theory, research and educator practices of engaging young people in learning social studies?

### **Implications for Self-Determination Theory**

Self-determination theory suggests that teachers can engage students in learning when they address their students' basic needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. In doing so, teachers effectively shift their students' motivation to learn from controlled and external to autonomous and internal. This study's findings support many aspects of self-determination theory. In describing how they engage in learning social studies, the students confirm that engagement is directly a result of satisfying their needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. In addition, the findings of this study reveal that when teachers 1) provide students with opportunities to connect to their learning emotionally, personally, socially, cognitively, conceptually and authentically, 2) provide structures to help students develop success, and 3) promote warm, caring and trusting relationships with their students, they can effectively engage students in academic work. More specifically, when teachers promote strategies such as "real discussions" in their classrooms, and when they help their students come to understand the value, importance and utility of learning social studies, they are able to ignite their students' innate and natural desire to learn. Conversely, when teachers neglect their students' autonomy, competence or relatedness, the students "tune out" and disengage.

By providing classroom examples of how two social studies teachers support autonomy, competence and relatedness in the classroom, this study also extends self-determination theory. Conceiving of autonomy as varying degrees of connections to social studies content may help teachers visualize how to effectively meet students' needs for autonomy. In addition, by



conceiving of competence as connections to success, I hope to shift teachers' focus from "What am I teaching?" to "What are my students learning?" to encourage teachers to ask, "What can I do to help insure that my students know they can be successful when learning social studies in my classroom?" And, depicting relatedness as connections between and among students, their peers and their teachers may help teachers appreciate the vital importance of helping students feel safe and respected in their classrooms. Thus, focus group transcripts and vignettes of classroom practice provide strong evidence of what self-determination theory looks like when put into practice in real classrooms.

### **Implications for Teachers**

The findings of this study also offer many important implications for social studies teachers and how they might engage their students in learning. While most teachers ask: "What types of curriculum and instruction can engage my students in learning?" the findings of this study suggest that engaging students in learning requires that teachers ask a different question: "What can I do to meet my students' needs for autonomy, competence and relationships in my classroom, and how might I structure my curriculum and instruction to support these innate psychological needs?" This shift in thinking about engagement is significant because motivating students to learn occurs as a result of supporting students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, rather than as a result of using any one curriculum or instructional strategy. Thus, it is not the simulation, role-play, debate, political cartoon, or movie itself that engages students in learning. Instead, it is how teachers structure those activities to address students' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness that affect student engagement. When students' needs are met, they are more actively engaged in learning. I argue here that educators shift from

“activity-centered” teaching toward an autonomy-, competence-, and relatedness-centered approach to teaching.

Evidence to support this argument surfaces throughout my study. Take for example Lisa’s Civil Rights Dinner Party. Students describe their engagement in terms of autonomy: being able to choose their activists, to role-play and interact with classmates, to think through how and why people act the way they did and compare it with how they might have acted, and making connections to other activists. They also explain their engagement terms of competence: not too hard, not too easy, having access to their placemats allowed them to focus on the interaction rather than memorizing facts and quotes. In addition, in terms of relatedness, judging by the vector graph, the students feel comfortable interacting with one another – Lisa barely says a word.

On the surface, the students appear to be very engaged in this activity; however, upon digging deeper, the students note that they do not really think the project is very challenging. Also, one student never feels connected or engaged because her “person” does not have anything in common with the others. Lisa might further internalize students’ motivation by challenging students to analyze the activists’ actions for effectiveness in bringing about change, or by integrating the moral and ethical dilemmas as a catalyst and organizer for the discussion. Thus, it is not necessarily the dinner party itself that engages students: it is the way that Lisa meets her students’ needs to be autonomous, competent and have a sense they belong, that engages her students in learning.

In addition to illustrating the importance of structuring discussions to support students’ autonomy, competence and relatedness, the findings of this study also suggest that teachers reconsider how students “connect” to the curriculum content. In addition to “making learning

relevant” by illustrating for students where history surfaces in the present, social studies teachers might also focus on “making learning important” by having students look beyond connections between individual events or topics and their modern-day counterparts. Teachers can present students with enduring or controversial big ideas and essential questions and encourage them to uncover and interrogate the value and meaning of the content. For example, rather than have students compare the Brooklyn Bridge, as a metaphor for the Industrial Revolution, with a modern form of technology, as a metaphor the Technology Revolution, social studies teachers might ask students to consider: What is a revolution? What was revolutionary about the Industrial Revolution? or the Technology Revolution? or the American Revolution? Was the Civil War, or the Progressive Era, or World War II, or the Civil Rights Movement, or the Cold War a revolution? Challenging students to examine “revolutions” shifts their cognitive demand from concrete comparisons to abstract conceptualizations.

Likewise, rather than tell students that topics like progressivism or imperialism or war or civil rights are still relevant today, social studies teachers might ask: “How do we or should we define progress?” or “Does might make right?” or “Is there ever a ‘just’ war?” or “What have you *not* learned about civil rights?” or “Is it possible to legislate civil rights?” By challenging students to ponder big ideas and compelling or enduring essential questions, teachers can not only *catch* their students’ attention, but they can also *hold* their students’ attention by helping them to discover for themselves the worth, importance, and utility of what they are learning.

Dewey (1902) described this relationship between the student and the subject matter as both the “logical” and the “psychological” aspects of experience – “the former standing for the subject-matter itself, the latter for it in relation to the child” (p. 114). To “psychologize” subject matter was to transform the material and develop it in ways that the child could approach it.

When the content is left in its adult, logical form, Dewey noted that adults must use a “trick of method to arouse interest...to make it interesting...to get the child to swallow and digest the unpalatable morsel while he is enjoying tasting something quite different” (p. 122). In the subject area of history education, Dewey suggested that young people should “become acquainted” with the past in such a way that the “acquaintance” helps the child to appreciate the “living present” (Dewey, 1938). Theorizing how to best “acquaint” young people with the past, Dewey opposed the notion that content should be presented to children as fixed, and that the accumulation of knowledge is an end in itself (Dewey, 1916). Instead, historical content would be presented to students as “immediate problems, which also happened to have historical significance” (Fallace, 2010, p. 4).

One way that teachers try to “acquaint” young people with the past is by illustrating how the past resurfaces in the present, what I refer to in this study as “then and now” connections. However, as Dewey (1938) recommends, rather than begin with the history and find a connection to today, social studies teachers can present students with “immediate problems,” which have historical significance. For example, rather than mention the legalization of marijuana when discussing the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment, teachers might ask: “Who should decide whether alcohol or marijuana should be legal?” Or, rather than mention that we can thank the progressives for our meat safety today, teachers might ask: “Who are the modern-day muckrakers and how do their methods compare with muckrakers at the turn of the century?” Or, rather than tell students that imperialism is important because so many global issues today stem from imperialism, teachers can challenge students to investigate: “What are the most pressing global issues in our world today? How might they have resulted from imperialism in the 1800s?” When teachers begin with these “immediate problems,” their students feel compelled

(autonomously) to look to the past for answers. Dewey (1913) argues that rather than look for a motive to connect students to the subject matter content, teachers and students should look within the subject matter to discover the motive for learning it.

If helping students to understand why social studies subject matter is important, worthwhile and useful is central to meeting students' needs to be self-determined and autonomous in learning, then how might teachers help their students discover the motive for learning social studies content? What, for example, is the motive for learning about federalism, or supply and demand or World War I, or landforms in Africa? In his book, "Why Don't Students Like School," Daniel Willingham (2009) recommends that teachers think about the social studies curriculum as the answers. If the curriculum provides the answers, then, what are the questions? Similarly, McTighe and Wiggins (2013) suggest in their book, "Essential Questions: Opening Doors to Student Understanding," that teachers may discover the potential motives for learning subject matter by thinking of the teaching unit or subject matter as the story. If the subject matter is the story, these authors ask, then what is the moral of the story? Engaging students in learning then, is not necessarily about finding ways to get them relate the subject matter, or to relate the past to the present. Rather, the findings of this study suggest that to engage students in learning, social studies teachers should help them discover why the learning is important and worth their effort.

Yet before social studies teachers can help their students discover why the learning is meaningful, they must have a clear sense of what *they* believe is the aim of teaching social studies. Whether social studies teachers believe their goal is to teach students traditional history for cultural transmission, civic education, historical or inquiry-based thinking, problem-based reflective thinking for social improvement or social reconstruction, teachers need to design their

curriculum and instruction with these aims and ends in mind (Evans, 2004). The implications of self-determination theory for social studies curriculum and instruction are based on the premise that the value that students place on subject matter tasks and activities is integral to maintaining their interest, internalizing their sources of motivation and connecting the content with their self-identity (Brophy, 2010; Ryan & Niemiec, 2009).

Both of the teachers in this study shared their teaching aims with me. Lisa wants her students to develop the capacity for informed moral and ethical decision-making and to discover how ordinary citizens can bring about change. Emmett wants his students to be curious about the world around them, and to understand what makes American culture uniquely so. Despite the teachers' clearly defined purposes for teaching, it is not clear from this study that their students endorsed or internalized their aims for teaching. To help their students internalize the purpose and value of social studies and history, teachers can model and scaffold an appreciation for the subjects, use big ideas and essential questions to guide their curricular and instructional decisions, and teach explicitly with purpose in mind. The backward design process described by Wiggins and McTighe (2005) in *Understanding by Design* directs teachers to plan their units and lessons beginning with the end, or purpose, in mind. Before developing their learning activities, teachers must first answer the question, "Why do my students need to know and do what I am asking them to know and do?" When using backward design, teachers identify the transferable understandings, big ideas and enduring questions inherent in the unit or content. With a focus on this 'end in mind,' teachers then develop assessments and learning activities that guide their students' toward understanding these big ideas and enduring questions. In this way, teachers are designing their curriculum and instruction around the value of learning social studies. Teaching

with the goal of motivating students to learn means finding ways to meet their students' needs to know why they need to know and do what their teachers ask of them.

Another implication of this study for social studies teachers comes directly from young people they teach. The students' voices, heard loud and clear throughout this study, provide great insight into how teachers might improve curriculum and instruction to promote and sustain student engagement in learning. The students in this study offer useful feedback on exactly what engages or disengages them in learning social studies; they identify why specific learning experiences fail to engage them, and they suggest how teachers might restructure their curriculum and instruction to promote and sustain their engagement. Yazzie-Mintz and McCormick (2012) note that young people offer a valuable, though rarely utilized, source of wisdom when it comes to understanding student engagement; yet ironically, administrators and teachers only seem to listen to students when it comes to their test scores. Students know what does and does not engage them in learning, and their teachers could learn a lot about student engagement by listening to them.

### **Implications for Teacher Education**

If we accept the premise that to engage young people in learning, social studies teachers must support their students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, then it follows that to engage teachers in the difficult work of engaging young people in academic work, teacher educators must also support their pre- and in-service teachers' needs for autonomy, competency, and relatedness. Student teachers, like the young people they will eventually teach, also need to know, "Why do I need to know or do this?" "Can I do this?" and "Do my teachers care about me?" Teacher educators not only need to help their student teachers endorse the importance and

value of engaging young people in learning (teacher autonomy), but they will also need to provide the necessary direction, instruction and scaffolding to help their student teachers learn how to engage their students in academic work (teacher competence). In addition, teacher educators will need to create safe spaces where student teachers can take risks and try new instructional strategies, interact with and learn from their colleagues, and where teacher educators demonstrate to their student teachers that they care about them (teacher relatedness).

The findings of this study provide many practical recommendations for how social studies teachers can effectively structure their learning activities to support their students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness in learning. However, the epidemic of disengagement in learning in schools today suggests that there is a vast gap between the theory and research on student engagement and its practical application in real classrooms. Thus, the task of teacher educators is not only to demonstrate for teachers *why* some strategies are more or less effective for engaging students in learning, but also *how* to effectively use those strategies that engage young people in learning. Borrowing a phrase from Parker and Hess (2001), I argue that teacher educators teach their student teachers both *with* and *for* student engagement. Teacher educators may teach *with* methods and strategies by modeling for student teachers and allowing them to *experience* those methods and strategies. When student teachers engage in learning through these methods, they are more likely to endorse the value and importance of using these methods to engage their students (autonomy-support). In addition, teacher educators may teach *for* these methods and strategies by demonstrating for student teachers *how* to effectively use these methods and strategies to engage students in learning. Teacher educators will need to provide clear expectations, directions and scaffolding for how to use these methods and strategies in teaching social studies. By supporting their student teachers' needs for competence, teacher



educators can increase the likelihood that the student teachers will use these methods and strategies to engage their students in learning. Finally, teacher educators should model building positive and caring relationships with their student teachers to demonstrate how student teachers might develop caring relationships with their students.

The implications of this study for teacher educators are grounded on the premise that to support teachers' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, teacher educators should teach *with* and *for* those methods and strategies that effectively engage young people in academic. To engage social studies teachers in learning how to engage young people in social studies, teacher educators may:

- **Teach *with* and *for* the end in mind** Teacher educators should convey the purpose, value and utility of their curriculum and instruction through essential questions and big ideas, encourage student teachers to identify their purposes and aims for teaching social studies, scaffold how student teachers can develop big ideas and essential questions around these purposes and aims, and provide teachers with direct instruction on how to use big ideas and essential questions to guide their curriculum and instruction.
- **Teach *with* and *for* backward design unit and lesson planning.** Teacher educators can use and model backward design to demonstrate to student teachers *why* this planning process is effective for developing units that engage students. They should also provide teachers with clear instruction on *how* to use backward design to plan engaging units. With repeated use and practice using backward design, teachers will be more likely to feel autonomous and competent in developing units of study with the end in mind.
- **Teach *with* and *for* methods and strategies that help students connect emotionally or personally to the content.** Teacher educators should use visuals, role-plays and simulations,

music, movement, novelty and ‘fun facts’ to catch student teachers’ attention and help them to value and “buy-into” using these strategies. And, teacher educators will need to provide direct instruction on *how* teachers can use these strategies to engage their students in academic work.

- **Teach with and for problem- and project-based learning.** Teacher educators should engage teachers in authentic problem-based learning to help teachers internalize and endorse the value of this approach to learning, and then provide direct instruction on how to effectively develop and implement problem-based learning in their classrooms.
- **Teach *with* and *for* different types of classroom discussions, including seminars, deliberations and debates.** Teacher educators should consistently engage student teachers in Socratic seminars, deliberations, and debates to demonstrate their engagement value. Because “real discussions” are rarely found in social studies classrooms, teacher educators will need to provide clear and explicit directions, as well as repeated practice, on how to facilitate these discussions effectively in the classroom.
- **Teach *with* and *for* primary source document analysis.** Analyzing primary documents can engage young people in learning, but teaching students how to analyze primary sources can be problematic and frustrating for many teachers. Teacher educators can help support student teachers’ need for competence in using this strategy by first engaging teachers in the process of analyzing primary sources and then providing direct instruction on how to effectively use primary sources to engage young people in inquiry.
- **Teach *with* and *for* formative assessments and student reflections.** Although formative assessments can be very effective for supporting students’ autonomy, competence and relatedness, teachers are often unsure of what they are, and how or when to use them. To

demonstrate how consistent feedback supports student engagement, teacher educators should use formative assessments effectively and consistently with their student teachers, and, in addition, provide direct instruction on how to develop and use formative assessments and reflections to support student teachers' needs for competence in using them with their students.

- **Teach *with* and *for* 'visible thinking routines.'** (Ritchhart et al., 2013) Visible thinking routines can be very effective at getting young people to connect emotionally, personally, cognitively and authentically to the content. They can also support students' needs for competence. Teacher educators should use routines such as *3-2-1*; *See-Think-Wonder*; and *Generate-Sort-Connect-Evaluate* to help student teachers understand why these types of strategies are effective for engaging students in their learning; but they will also need to support their student teachers' need for competence by providing them with direct instruction and repeated practice on how to use these thinking routines with the students in their classrooms.
- **Teach *with* and *for* real-world, authentic assessments.** When student teachers see the clear connections between student engagement theory, research and practice, they are more likely to endorse the value of authentic work and seek out opportunities to use authentic assessments in their classrooms. Yet before student teachers will develop and use authentic assessments, they will need to know *how* to effectively develop and implement authentic assessment tasks with students.

To support new teachers as they learn *why* and *how* to engage their students in learning, teacher educators will need to provide them with opportunities to experience engaging curriculum and instruction, and present them with clear and direct instructions on how to implement those

strategies and methods. Perhaps most importantly, student teachers will require multiple opportunities to practice these new methods and strategies in safe and caring classroom contexts where they can interact with their peers, and reflect on what worked or did not work. Essentially, to support their student teachers' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness in learning why and how to engage their students in academic work, teacher educators will not only have to "talk the student engagement talk," but they will need to "walk the student engagement walk" by teaching *with* and *for* student engagement.

### **For Future Research**

The findings of this study contribute to the literature on student engagement by identifying how two U.S. history teachers support their students' autonomy, competence and relatedness and thus activate their students' motivation to learn. My data provides rich descriptions of what engages students in social studies academic work and practical strategies for how social studies teachers might structure lessons and units to foster their students' engagement. However, the field of student engagement research would greatly benefit from studies that employ a similar theoretical framework and methodology across a variety of settings, including public schools, schools with larger and more diverse populations, urban and rural schools. While I focus on U.S. history in this study, future research might examine how teachers might engage students in other social studies subjects such as world history, world cultures, geography, government or civics, and economics. In addition, I did not examine what role, if any, technology plays in supporting students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness; frankly, the students did not mention technology in our discussions of engagement. Yet, the push for technology integration in schools warrants investigations into what, if any, impact

technologies and interactive capabilities might have on internalizing students' motivation to learn. Lastly, although my findings on autonomy support were data-driven, I turned to existing research on self-determination theory to understand how teachers might support students' competence and relatedness. Future researchers might integrate more questions in the interviews and focus groups that target how teachers specifically support their students' needs for competence and relatedness.

### **Conclusion**

Drawing directly on my data, I conceive of student engagement in learning social studies as three types of connections – between the students and the subject matter, between the students and their own success, and between the students and their teachers and peers in the classroom. Students may connect autonomously with the subject matter emotionally, personally, socially, cognitively, conceptually, chronologically or authentically. These connections may fall anywhere along a *continuum of internalization*, which flows from extrinsically controlled to extrinsically autonomous. Where student connections to the content, to their success, or to their teachers and peers land on this continuum depends not necessarily on the type of connection, but instead on the extent to which the connection fosters students' autonomy, competence and relatedness. As the students become more autonomous in their learning, interestingly (and perhaps ironically), they require more guidance and stronger relationships in the classroom to support the cognitive demand that comes with autonomous learning.

For example, understanding whether or not President Polk wanted to go to war with Mexico did not appear to engage Emmett's students. In later discussions with the students, however, I discovered that their lack of engagement was not due to a lack of interest in or value for figuring out what was going on during this time in history. In fact, the students shared that

they enjoyed these types of activities and being able to understand the “mentality” of the times through analyzing primary source documents. Rather, the students shared that they did not engage because the readings were too difficult, the same people always answered the teacher’s questions, they did not have enough time to read and analyze the documents, and they were not quite sure for what they were supposed to be looking. In addition, they knew their teacher would eventually sum it up for them, so they did not feel a strong sense of autonomy or urgency. Autonomy, competence and relatedness work together; the absence of any one of the tripartite could thwart the students’ engagement in learning.

Through this research study, I was hoping to find the magic engagement bullet inside Lisa and Emmett’s classrooms at the Gateway school. Although I did not discover the cure for student apathy and disengagement in social studies, these two passionate and dedicated teachers and their incredibly astute students did help me to understand how engagement works and when it works in their classrooms. In addition, when engagement does not work, I learned that I could apply self-determination theory to diagnose the sources of disengagement and potentially treat the illness using a strong dose of autonomy, competence or relatedness-support.

This research study demonstrates that student engagement in academic work is critical, both for school achievement and also for life-long learning. However, before students will engage in learning, they need to internalize the reasons for learning, believe they can master the challenges presented in the work, and know that their teachers and peers respect and support them.

Yet the same can be said of their teachers. Before teachers will make the effort necessary to engage their students in academic work, they too need to endorse the value and importance of student engagement for academic achievement and lifelong learning, to believe they know how

to effectively engage their students, and to feel supported and respected enough by administrators and colleagues to take risks and try new ways of engaging kids. Despite the many challenges that teachers face in engaging their students to learn, (e.g. overcrowded classrooms, an overstuffed curriculum, an overemphasis on testing, and feeling overwhelmed), student engagement remains at the heart of effective teaching. It is this researcher's sincere desire that this research study takes one small step toward supporting social studies teachers' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and one giant leap toward understanding how social studies teachers can promote and sustain their students' engagement in learning.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix A: Eighth Grade Observation Transcripts**

- Appendix A.1: Observation 1, September 17, 2014
- Appendix A.2: Observation 3, September 22, 2014
- Appendix A.3: Observation 4, September 30, 2014
- Appendix A.4: Observation 5, October 22, 2014
- Appendix A.5: Observation 6, October 30, 2014
- Appendix A.6: Observation 7, November 5, 2014
- Appendix A.7: Observation 8, November 14, 2014
- Appendix A.8: Observation 9, November 19, 2014
- Appendix A.9: Observation 11, December 9, 2014
- Appendix A.10: Observation 14, January 10, 2015

### **Appendix B: Eleventh Grade Observation Transcripts**

- Appendix B.1: Observation 1, September 18, 2014
- Appendix B.2: Observation 2, September 23, 2014
- Appendix B.3: Observation 10, November 18, 2014
- Appendix B.4: Observation 11, December 4, 2014
- Appendix B.5: Observation 12, December 8, 2014
- Appendix B.6: Observation 13, January 6, 2015
- Appendix B.7: Observation 14, January 13, 2015
- Appendix B.8: Observation 15, January 21, 2015

### **Appendix C: Teacher Interview Transcripts**

- Appendix C.1: Lisa Randall Interview (LR Interview): September 16, 2014
- Appendix C.2: Emmett Blackwell Interview (EB Interview)

### **Appendix D: Teacher Reflection Transcripts**

- Appendix D.1: LR Reflection II 2-3-15
- Appendix D.2: EB Reflection I, December 8, 2014
- Appendix D.3: EB, Reflection II January 13, 2015
- Appendix D.4: EB, Reflection IV, January 13, 2015
- Appendix D.5: EB Reflection V – Mexican American War



Appendix D.6: EB Reflection VI (Slave Narratives/Student Portraits - January 29, 2015)

### **Appendix E: Focus Group Transcripts**

Appendix E.1: 8<sup>th</sup> Grade – FG 1, October 23, 2014

Appendix E.2: 8<sup>th</sup> Grade – FG 2, November 14, 2014

Appendix E.3: 8<sup>th</sup> Grade – FG 3, January 27, 2015

Appendix E.4: 11<sup>th</sup> Grade – FG 1, October 23, 2014

Appendix E.5: 11<sup>th</sup> Grade – FG 2, November 20, 2014

Appendix E.6: 11<sup>th</sup> Grade – FG 3, February 5, 2015

### **Appendix F: Online Survey**

Question 1: How much does each of the following classroom activities engage you in learning social studies?

Question 2: How much does your social studies teacher emphasize the following?

Question 3: Have you ever been bored in social studies?

Question 4: If you have been bored in social studies, why? Choose all of the answers that apply.

Question 5: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements as they relate to your social studies or history class?

Question 7: Thank you very much for taking this survey. If you have any other comments that you think would be helpful to this study, please add them below.

### **Appendix G: Documents**

Appendix G.1: Selma Reflection

Appendix G.2: The Sting of Discrimination

Appendix G.3: See, Think, Wonder – Eyes on the Prize

Appendix G.4: 100 Years Project

Appendix G.5: Ben Franklin Essay

Appendix G.6: 11<sup>th</sup> Grade Quiz on Race and Ethnicity

### **Appendix H: IRB Forms**

Appendix H.1: Child Assent Form

Appendix H.2: Informed Consent Form

Appendix H.3: Parental Permission Form